

The Walls of Jericho

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Summary: Over four years after the end of the Human-Covenant War, renegade elements aim to disturb the fragile peace between humanity and the former Covenant races. A Spartan-III and a veteran Skirmisher find themselves working together to track down a powerful terrorist, only to become caught up in a conspiracy that threatens to ignite another war.

## 1. Falling Down

\*\*Falling Down\*\*

October 9th, 2557

There was a sense of anticipation, mingled with a bit of dread, when the main entrance was forced open. The metal bulkhead was of little challenge to the Spartan, as one of the many perks of being such a soldier was strength in excess of that of an average human. The darkness beyond did little to alter the his feelings, with his mind set solely on the mission at hand and keeping most of his emotions carefully suppressed. He had been briefed on the situation and sent in alone in order to keep the whole scenario under wraps. New Sanctuary was a prosperous mining colony on the edge of UNSC space, one of the few that had been left intact during the Human-Covenant War. The people here were also very wary of the UNSC and would not take kindly to a direct intervention on their affairs from that organization. However, the nature of the current situation had been serious enough for a Spartan to be called in to deal with it.

Spartan A-079, a First Lieutenant, also carried the more ordinary name of 'Leon'. He was in his late twenties, a Spartan-III who had found himself carrying out missions for a more specialized branch of the military. The other Spartans like him were spread out across multiple units and organizations, many sent on the more dangerous and/or sensitive missions that came up. The current situation involved a mine and a missing strike team, one that had been sent in to investigate reports of alien activity on the colony, particularly

around the aforementioned mine.

The mine itself was situated in a fairly desolate region, covered with sparse desert shrubs and dotted with mesas and buttes. The heat was fairly uncomfortable, made worse by the fact that it was midday and the sun was at its highest point, its harsh rays beating down on the desert all around. Leon was outfitted in a set of Mark VI armour with an Operator model helmet, the visor a deep grey colour to help filter out the harsh light. Being inside the bulky armour with its internal cooling systems did provide some relief from the desert heat, but not enough to stop sweat from building across his form. Leon's face under that helmet was pale, with dull blue eyes and close-cropped brown hair, a few beads of sweat forming on his brow as he took a step back and regarded the mine entrance.

There was a stairwell leading down into the mine, with light fixtures set along the walls at evenly spaced intervals. Leon carried a MA5D assault rifle, with a sidearm stuck to the armour at his waist and a few grenades and spare magazines in pouches that ran across his chest. He started down the stairwell, entering the relative coolness of the tunnel as it took him underground, going on for some distance before it opened up into a much larger cavern. The rock down here was mostly light brown, with noticeable ore deposits in some parts of the walls. The cavern took up a few levels of the mine, with tunnels branching off and catwalks up above. Leon stopped where he was for a moment, testing his helmet radio.

"This is Spartan A-079." Leon's tone was level, his voice carrying some trace of an Outer Colonies accent, a remnant of his childhood growing up on a world that had been destroyed by the Covenant.  
"Commander, can you hear me?"

"I can hear you." Commander McGillon's voice broke in through his helmet radio, hissing with some amount of static but still perfectly audible. "Are you in the mine?"

"Yeah." Leon regarded the cavern again, his gaze going to the bodies on the far end. They were scattered about, with dried blood stains on the floor around them. He narrowed his gaze when he saw all of this, knowing for certain that the strike team had been met with hostility. There were no miners here, or any other civilians for that matter, as they had evacuated days before when a chemical spill had occurred in one of the lower levels of the mine. Recently gathered intelligence suggested that the whole thing had been some kind of ruse, giving whoever had come here afterward free reign of the mine.

"There are bodies down here." Leon started down the stairs ahead, going to the cavern floor before making his way over to the nearest corpse. They were all marines, outfitted in the grey armour of the UNSC Maine Corps. Leon put a gloved hand to one of the blood stains, noticing that it was still relatively fresh. The wounds of the marine in front of him had been cauterized, a tell-tale sign that energy weaponry had been used.

"It's the strike-team," Leon added.

"Any survivors?" McGillon's tone was grim. Elise McGillon, in the months Leon had known her, seemed unlike what her personnel record stated. She was apparently too reckless for some of the higher-ups, despite acting almost completely by-the-book during the time Leon had

known her. It might have something to do with the fact that she had been relegated to a sort-of "supervisor" role rather than one of direct combat.

Leon stood up and looked around at the other bodies. None of them were moving, but as he was about to write-off the whole strike team, one of the presumably dead marines did suddenly squirm and cough. Leon raced over to the young African-American marine, who sat partially slumped against a stack of metal crates. He had been struck in the chest by some sort of energy weapon, the armour around the site having melted away and fused with the cauterized flesh behind it. Leon was quick to remove a first aid kit from one of the pouches on his armour, starting on cleaning the wound as best he could. The marine's rank was Corporal and the tag on the front of his armour, from what Leon could make out amongst the scorch marks, was 'Griggs'.

"Corporal, what happened?" Leon asked, using one hand to tilt the dazed marine's face towards him. Griggs coughed and looked to be in a daze, something that was understandable for his current condition.

"There's..." Griggs moved one hand, clutching the one Leon had at his chest. The marine gave a serious expression, as if there was far more at stake here than a mere alien raid. Leon had not been told what aliens to expect as none of his superiors had known, but he had assumed that Covenant loyalists might have been involved. Perhaps even Sangheili insurgents, as they had been gaining numbers in the recent months, determined to overthrow what government they had.

"They came for..." Griggs struggled to form a full sentence. Leon could see that the marine had little chance to survive his wounds, but it appeared he would not let himself go before telling Leon what he needed to know. "They lured...us..."

"Why? What did they want? And who were they?" Leon put a hand to Grigg's chin, gripping him firmly in the hopes of keeping him conscious a little while longer. "Look at me, Corporal. What happened here?" He got the impression that his superiors had not told him the whole story.

"Lieutenant, leave the man," McGillon interjected, his voice stern. "We've just received reports that there is a convoy of vehicles heading for your location. Local authorities, no doubt."

"What haven't I been told?" Leon turned away from Griggs and stood up, doing his best to keep the building feeling of anger from seeping into his voice. "Why would a squad of marines be lured here? What's going on? I don't want to be left in the dark!"

"If you can't find the perpetrators or any intel on their whereabouts, get out of there. I'm going to abort the mission."

"No, you can't do that." It was a fairly futile demand to make, but something told him there was far more to the current mission than a typical alien raid.

Leon's gaze went to the odd man out which was, in this case, the body of a UNSC official that had been just on the edge of his vision,

concealed behind a large drilling machine. Griggs had stopped moving, having succumbed to his wounds and leaving Leon was no real source of information. He certainly could not rely on McGillon, not when important details had been left out of his briefing.

There was a small portable computer by the official's corpse, one that had had its hard drive completely ripped out. Leon recognized the model of computer: it was a sort used solely for the transport of artificial intelligences, capable of emitting a small holographic image of the particular AI. He had worked with similar technology in the past. The official was a middle-aged and bald man with a grey beard. He beared a rather nasty wound across the throat, as if someone had sliced it open with a sharp blade. A quick search of the official revealed an identification tag that distinguished him as a member of the Office of Naval Intelligence.

"Your orders are to get out of there, Lieutenant," McGillon said sternly. "Get out of there before the local police arrive, otherwise we're going to have a hell of a time explaining why we've got a Spartan on the ground."

"What about the marines?"

"We can explain that away as a training exercise gone wrong. You, on the other hand, aren't as easily explained. And one thing we don't need is you shooting up a bunch of colonial cops..."

"I don't intend on shooting them up."

"They'll probably happily shoot at you. Face it, Lieutenant: You're not that expendable."

It was strange, hearing that. Spartan-IIIs had been intended to be expendable right from the beginning. It was only now, after the war had decreased their numbers considerably, that such useful assets were not so happily given up.

"Why is there an ONI official here?" Leon asked, standing up. He heard noise from somewhere nearby, his gaze going towards a stack of metal boxes at the far end of the cavern. There was nothing there, not at this instant anyway. Alert, he kept his assault rifle in one hand as he stuck the dead man's ID into a pouch at his waist.

"How about you get out of that mine?" McGillon's voice was laced with frustration.

"What's going on here?" Leon looked up again, seeing a flash of movement across the catwalk. It was a large figure, perhaps over eight feet, one that went sprinting along the catwalk and out of view within seconds. Leon started straight after it, heading back up the metal stairs before getting back onto the catwalk.

"The official is down there because the miners discovered Forerunner ruins. ONI is very interested in that sort of thing." McGillon sounded resigned, but knew it was probably better to clue the Spartan in on all the details. Leon was focused on catching up with whoever he had just seen, but he did make out McGillon's words clearly. "At least, that's the word we got from the miners. I'm not sure if it was proven to be true or not..."

"Did they tell him to bring a military grade AI with him?" Leon spoke in-between breaths as he sprinted after the mysterious figure, heading into a narrow tunnel that winded up and down for some distance. He caught a glimpse of the figure as he turned a corner onto a fairly level stretch of the tunnel: the figure was certainly over eight feet, outfitted in light grey armour and undoubtedly alien in appearance. He recognized the species instantly: Sangheili, or an 'Elite' as the unofficial term went.

"Why do you ask that?" McGillon asked.

"You saw that computer I found on him. The AI's storage disk was gone, so I assume the Elite I'm chasing now might have it. I'm hoping that's the case, anyway."

"What?" McGillon was surprised to hear this. Leon kept on the alien's tail as the tunnel took them both out of the mine's rear entrance and into an outdoor loading area of some kind. Leon stopped for a minute, watching as a large six-wheeled truck emerged from around a mesa ahead. There was still about fifty metres of open ground between it and the Elite, but the truck had started to speed towards them with the clear intention of picking up the alien.

There were two more similarly dressed Elites, both of whom emerged from behind one of the parked trucks across the loading area. Getting a better look at their armour now, Leon could see that it was a ragtag setup of differing kinds of armours, as if these Elites did not have the resources to get proper military sets. It was not just Elites either: about three Jackals, or 'Kig-Yar' as the proper name went, appeared nearby. They were shorter but far more agile than the tall and regal Elites, with the three of them carrying bright blue oval energy shields that were emitted from devices on their forearms. Their avian appearances and bird-like screeches gave them an intimidating persona, though Leon had dealt with many of the creatures before and was not so easily fazed.

While the Elite he had been pursuing started for the truck, which had pulled to a halt nearby, Leon drew up his assault rifle and opened fire on the Jackals as they spread out. Rifle rounds kicked up sand and pummelled into the energy shields the Jackals were carrying. One of them buckled under the stress, leaving a brief opening that Leon exploited quickly, sending rifle rounds into the alien's side, ripping holes through its flesh and causing it to fall upon the ground into a pool of its dark purple blood. The other two opened fire from the protection of their portable energy shields, both wielding plasma pistols that sent green bolts of energy zipping by Leon.

The Spartan dived into cover, watching as the two Elites up ahead started to move in on his flank, sending fire from their plasma rifles his way. Leon knew he had to get the AI disk back, as letting something like that fall into enemy hands would be disastrous for the UNSC. These particular aliens were definitely insurgents of some sort, perhaps even mercenaries as such work had become popular with some within the former Covenant species. The war had left all the races in the Covenant ruined in many ways, the religion they had so fanatically followed proven false and their cultures upturned as a result. Hiring themselves out to warlords and private contractors seemed like a good alternative for some of the alien soldiers who had been put out of work once the war had ended.

The Elite whom Leon had been pursuing was close to making it to the truck. The local authorities that McGillon had told him were coming had finally started to arrive: several grey-painted roofed Warthog vehicles came into view, two of which came to a halt outside the loading area. It served as an adequate distraction, with Leon hosing down the remaining two Jackals with assault rifle fire, cutting them down once their shields failed.

The officers who emerged from the Warthogs were lightly armed and armoured but nonetheless opened fire on the two Elites in the loading area. These Elites lacked their usual sophisticated shielding technology and went down fairly easily, though this equated to a few volleys of rifles fire rather than the copious amounts that would have been required had they been fitted with personal shields.

Another two of the local authority vehicles started after the now fleeing truck. The Elite that Leon had been pursuing had climbed into the back of the truck and was firing his plasma rifle from the opening there, sending bolts of blue energy into the Warthogs going into pursuit. Leon emerged from cover and started running after the truck, stopping on the dirt road behind it before taking aim at its rear and opening fire.

"If he has the AI..." McGillon's voice was serious. She could see everything Leon could through his live helmet camera feed, as well as his vital signs. Even so, there was a lot that McGillon had to deal with on her end, least of all some rather worried officers who had started barging into the operations room where she was coordinating the mission from.

"Can't you do a scan and find out?" Leon asked. The magazine on his assault rifle clicked on empty and the truck was getting well out of range. He turned around and headed for one of the parked Warthogs, receiving a few surprised glances from the colony police officers as he climbed into one of the vehicles. "Better yet, start searching for any spacecraft, such as a Phantom that these guys might be planning on using to escape. I seriously doubt they're just going to keep driving through the desert."

"I'm on it," McGillon said before falling silent, shifting her focus onto this new task.

Leon turned to one of the officers. These Outer Colony types had never been very friendly to anyone from the UNSC, but right now Leon needed some help.

"I need someone to drive," he said bluntly. That way he could focus on disabling the truck, rather than having to do two complicated things at once.

"What you really need to do is get out of the car," one of the officers said. He was a well-built man who looked to be in his forties, with brown eyes and a moustache. "I don't know what's going on here, so for all I know you could be working with those alien bastards..."

Leon sighed, though this was not visible to the officers as it occurred under his helmet. Settling into the driver's seat, he was

glad to see the keys were still in the ignition. Shifting the vehicle into the appropriate gear, Leon put his foot on the accelerator and sent the Warthog speeding forwards, a plume of dust erupting in its wake. The two officers he had left behind could do little to stop him.

The truck was far up ahead, speeding along a highway that winded across the desert. This road ran between mesas with narrower dirt roads branching off, some of which lead to small settlements and other mining complexes. The truck itself was fairly slow compared to the Warthog, allowing Leon to catch up to it fairly quickly. There were two other Warthogs racing behind it, both containing local police officers. One of them had started shooting at the truck's rear, only for the Elite in the back to return fire with a plasma rifle. Leon watched as the bolts blasted through the windshield on the Warthog, striking the driver who slumped against the steering wheel and sent the vehicle into an abrupt swerve that took it off-road. It flew off an embankment before rolling downhill a few times, coming to rest on its side.

Leon came up behind the truck, keeping his foot on the accelerator as he took his hands off of the wheel and pulled out his pistol. The Elite was at the back of the truck, shooting at the other Warthog, blowing out its windshield in a similar fashion to the previous one. The driver hit the brakes in a panic, bringing the Warthog to an abrupt halt.

Leon took aim with his pistol and pulled the trigger, feeling the powerful side-arm buckle slightly in his grip. It was difficult to get a clean shot on a moving vehicle from another moving vehicle, though of the three he managed to fire he saw that at least one found its mark. The Elite grunted as a round tore through his arm, causing him to drop the plasma rifle which in turn clattered out the back of the truck and onto the road, far out of reach.

"Lieutenant, I think I may have located a Covenant Phantom drop-ship on its way to your position," McGillon said at that moment, catching Leon off-guard for a second. The Elite had retreated further back into the truck, allowing the Spartan a moment of reprieve. "It was flying low and on minimal power so it was hard to detect, but it's there."

"Can you send someone to intercept?" Leon asked. He continued to watch the rear of the truck, waiting for the Elite to show its face again.

"I'm working on it. The officers up here would much rather keep this whole operation low-key. If word got out that we lost a military AI..."

"We're not going to lose it." Leon was determined to stop the AI from falling into the hands of the enemy, aware of what may happen if they got away with it.

He used one hand on the steering wheel while his other gripped his pistol. He took the Warthog up alongside the truck and brought it close to the driver's cabin. At this close proximity, he attempted to get a look through the side window but was unable to get a clear view. He raised the pistol and fired a few shots which blew the window out and took the driver by surprise, judging from the way the

truck swerved suddenly. It collided with the side of Leon's Warthog. The Spartan was rocked about in his seat and had to quickly grab hold of the steering wheel in order to put the vehicle back on track.

"What's the status on the Phantom?" Leon asked.

"I'd say you've got about five minutes," McGillon said. "We could send in fighters, but they wouldn't make it in time. That thing could use its gravity lift to pick the truck right up. We could lose the AI and the perpetrators..."

"Can't we intercept at all?"

"No guarantees. If they're desperate to get away..." She trailed off, as if distracted.

"What's the matter?" Leon could already tell there was something seriously wrong on her end. As if he needed even more complications.

"There's a Covenant cruiser emerging from behind the planet's moon," McGillon said. "Looks like we found their means of escape from this system."

"Can you hold them off?"

"Possibly, but we're only a frigate. They've got the heavier firepower."

"I'll deal with them down here, you focus on disabling that cruiser. If things go badly down here, then you'll need to stop that cruiser from leaving-

"I'm well aware of that, Lieutenant," McGillon interrupted.

Leon returned his attention to the truck. He fired a few more pistol shots at the side window, emptying the magazine before taking a moment to reload. The truck started to close in on his side again, scraping up against the far smaller Warthog. Leon seized this opportunity and rose from his seat, grabbing hold of the door handle on the truck's side. Rounding a corner, the truck came onto a stretch of highway that ran by a steep hill-side with only a flimsy metal barrier between the road and the slope. Leon was slammed against the side of the truck rather forcefully as its driver took the turn sharply and quickly, sending the Warthog the Spartan had just been inside speeding into the barrier. It smashed through the rusted metal and went airborne for a brief moment as it hit the slope, before crashing down and rolling, leaving a large cloud of dust in its wake.

Leon held on tightly to the door handle, putting his pistol back to his waist before using his other hand to grip the side of the driver's cabin. With a hand on the handle, he pulled it and forced it open, almost tearing it off of its hinges. Inside was a Jackal, outfitted in dirty beige and grey armour and wearing a pair of thick goggles that came complete with a bright blue computerized heads-up display. The Jackal let go of the steering wheel, locking it into cruise control and freeing both of its hands. It pulled a curved, tribal looking blade from a sheath at its waist and turned to face

the Spartan. The truck was on a fairly straight stretch of highway, so neither of them had to worry about the truck going off-road just yet.

Leon lunged forwards in the cramped confines of the driver's cabin, grabbing the Jackal's blade-wielding hand. He twisted it in one fluid motion, causing the bone at the alien's elbow to break with a rather loud and sickening crack! There was a spray of purple blood as bone broke through the skin and the alien screeched in pain and fell back against its chair, allowing Leon to put a hand to its throat before plunging it head first into the windshield. The glass shattered and he pushed the wounded alien out of the truck and across the hood. It tumbled across the front and disappeared under the truck, a sudden bump and followed by the sound of bones crunching indicating that the Jackal had met its end underneath the truck's wheels.

The truck itself was still in cruise control but Leon reached over and grabbed the wheel, turning the cruise control off and taking the next turn. He was not ready for the smaller truck that was parked dead in the middle of the highway around that corner, forcing him to stamp on the brakes and spin the wheel to one side. He was too late to stop the truck from going off-road, breaking through the barrier and starting down the slope, carried forwards by its own momentum. Being lurched about violently inside the cabin, Leon held on to the seat as the truck started to roll while kicking up a cloud of dust as it trundled down the slope.

It finally came to a halt at the base of the slope, now a dented wreck with missing parts. Leon, somewhat dazed, emerged from the driver's cabin, climbing onto the top of the truck as it lay on its side. He took a moment to regather his bearings, taking off his helmet and wiping the sweat from his brow while he looked around. Just who would park their truck in the middle of a highway, anyway?

Whoever had done it, he got the feeling it was not there from coincidence. He started towards the truck's rear, stopping halfway as he watched the Elite from earlier climb out.

Leon started running towards him, but the Elite was quick to turn around. He was holding a human-built pistol in one hand and fired a few shots, a few of which were absorbed by the Spartan's armour. Leon realized then how foolish he had been to take off his helmet, as doing so had deactivated his armour's personal shield.

Stumbling, Leon fell off of the truck and onto the sand, only a few metres from where a sharp drop lead straight into a ditch filled with sand coloured boulders. The Elite came around the side of the truck and raised the pistol in order to finish off the Spartan, but Leon grabbed a rock from close at hand and swivelled around, throwing it with considerable force towards the Elite. He caught the alien in the arm, causing it to drop the pistol. Leon jumped back onto his feet, aware of a dull pain near his ribs and a heavy sensation in his lungs that implied that one of the bullets he had taken had gone right through and busted into that organ. Regardless, he pressed forwards, lunging for the dropped pistol.

The Elite had recovered from the blow by this point and seemed to relish the thought of a proper fight. It was typical Sangheili pride at work, with Leon diving for the pistol only for the alien to kick

the arm he had outstretched, sending pain shooting up to his shoulder. The pistol itself also received part of the blow, being launched a short distance before it clattered off of the edge and into the ditch several metres below. Leon rolled onto his back and lashed out with a powerful kick at one of the Elite's knees, causing him to buckle and giving the Spartan a chance to jump back onto his feet.

Facing the Elite, Leon could get a closer look at it. The armour was mostly grey and beige, coloured for the desert environment. Its arms were bare and its armour rugged in design. It wore no helmet and its eyes were blue in colour, each with a slitted black pupil in the centre. It swung a punch at Leon, who dodged and countered it, his close-combat training kicking in. Going for a low strike, Leon delivered a quick punch into the alien's stomach which caused it to grunt but it nonetheless countered his next move, grabbing his right arm before kicking him in the stomach and making him stumble backwards.

Winded, Leon nonetheless resumed the attack. He lunged for the Elite, tackling the bulky alien onto the ground. He delivered a sharp right hook across the Elite's face. The alien snarled and grabbed him with both hands, throwing him off and sending him into the dirt. The Elite was back on his feet quickly, delivering a powerful kick with one of its booted and hoofed feet that broke one of Leon's ribs.

Coughing up blood, Leon swallowed what he could and swung out with both legs. This made the Elite stumble again, allowing the Spartan to stand up and swing another punch. The Elite grabbed the arm when it was mere inches from its face and used its free hand to go in for a low attack near Leon's stomach. The Spartan countered this quickly, deflecting the blow and sending a powerful kick into the Elite's stomach. The alien slammed against the wrecked truck behind it, stunned for a few seconds. This allowed Leon to strike it across the face, knocking out a few of its sharp teeth, tenderizing the muscles in its quadruple-hinged jaw.

Leon sent a left-hook into its face to follow-up. The alien snarled again, deflecting the next strike and delivering one of its own. This one struck Leon across the face, sending a wave of pain through his skull that made him stumble backwards a few steps. He recovered quickly, as any Spartan would, but the Elite was quick to react, pushing the Spartan towards the edge that lead straight into the rocky ditch.

Up above, by the broken barrier along the highway, Leon caught a glimpse of another few aliens. They were Jackals, about three of them watching the fight from afar. One was larger than the other two, over six foot tall with a far more muscular frame. The three were outfitted in desert-coloured armour and rags, with the larger one, a Skirmisher, had started to level a beam rifle at the pair fighting below. Perhaps it had been these three who had left the truck in the middle of the road, with the intention to catch him off-guard?

Leon saw the AI disk fall from a pouch on the Elite's rugged armour. It was a small blue and green thing, no bigger than his thumb but capable of carrying a powerful and intelligent military AI that held a wealth of information. Such things had measures built in to ensure no enemy force could use them, but there was no way of knowing whether these renegades had the means of bypassing these fail-safes.

Leon reached for the disk but the Elite stopped him, sending a punch into his chest that exacerbated the bullet wound already there, sending agonizing pain shooting through his torso.

Doing his best to fight through the pain, Leon charged into the Elite, knocking him to the ground before sending punch after punch into his head. It was unrelenting as Leon pounded the alien's skull into the dirt, dark purple blood spurting forth once the Elite's skull cracked open and the brain became visible. With alien blood soaking the front of his armour and dripping down his face, Leon slowly rose up from the dead alien and looked towards the Jackals watching from afar. He may have reacted faster to what came next had he not already been beaten and bloodied in places.

The beam rifle shot from the Skirmisher caught him dead in the centre of the chest. It burned painfully, severing the spine and causing his legs to give way beneath him. He fell backwards and off of the edge that took him straight into the ditch below. He landed on the boulders, his armour absorbing some of the impact but even that did not stop some of his bones from breaking in places. He could barely move his head, lying sprawled across the rocks, his gaze looking up the slope. He was conscious, pain wracking his body but unable to so much as lift a finger. Part of him wanted to lose consciousness, if only to end the ordeal. Realizing his situation, a wave of anger washed over him, an anger felt towards how powerless he had suddenly become.

The Skirmisher appeared at the edge above, looking down on his through a set of thick goggles. With one hand, it pushed them up from its face, its yellow eyes with their slitted pupils focusing on the crippled Spartan below. It spoke, its voice raspy and masculine with a surprisingly good grasp of English.

"I never thought I would get the opportunity to bring down a great Spartan warrior," the Skirmisher said mockingly. It bared its teeth in a cruel smile, the plume of dark feathers on its head tilting slightly backwards. "You tried valiantly, but even that was not enough." The Skirmisher paused for a moment. Leon wanted to lash out and break the alien's neck but he simply became more enraged at being unable to in his current state.

"Take what happened today as a lesson. Not even one of the mighty Spartan warriors can stop judgement from coming."

With that, the Skirmisher turned and walked away. Leon lost consciousness shortly afterwards, his broken body left in the harsh heat of the desert sun on some alien world.

## 2. Family Matters

\*\*Family Matters\*\*

November 22nd, 2557

Sauem was a world of warm climates and bright blue oceans, a glistening jewel in the darkness of space, the only planet within its system to be inhabitable. It was a colony world of the Kig-Yar, one of many that had been settled years before the Covenant had absorbed the species into its ranks. The Kig-Yar, as a species, had been

space-faring longer than most of the other races and had a very capable economic system that had seen worlds such as Sauem prosper. It was a major world for the sub-species known as the "Skirmisher", or Malav-Yar as it went in the species' main language. Compared to the normal Kig-Yar, Skirmishers were larger, faster, stronger and in some cases a bit more intelligent. However, their numbers were few compared to the normal Kig-Yar and many of those in their governing body held more traditionalist views on things. Where the normal Kig-Yar had quickly accepted the peace between humanity and the Covenant races, many of the Skirmishers had opted to remain out of diplomatic relations with the humans, deciding on a more isolationist route.

The world's history was rife with civil war between warring clans, who had fought on large ocean-faring barges capable of carrying entire family units. It had not been until their absorption into the Covenant that they had become unified, bringing an age of peace to Sauem and allowing it to become as successful as it was today. The planet's surface was dotted with islands and archipelagos, its major "cities" being collections of wood and metal buildings that were packed close together and upon one another, creating tall inter-connected neighbourhoods that towered over the tall trees. Industrialization had seen some areas become somewhat polluted but otherwise much of the planet had its nature relatively intact. It was a peaceful place, though through the unfortunate events of the war many of the younger male Skirmishers were missing. Their numbers had been brought down through the war, crippled to such an extent that the Covenant had ceased deploying them in the final months of the conflict. There were many widows on Sauem, their male bond-partners casualties in the war. It had been a wise decision by those on the governing council to bring their forces back to defend their home-world and its colonies, including Sauem, as the war reached its final and devastating months.

A major township on the tip of a narrow peninsula was one of the more active trading hubs, where Kig-Yar merchants came and went with their wares. Natural resource shipments, particularly important ores, were processed out in the factories on the outskirts of the town. Much of the jungle on the island had been left untouched, with only as much was needed to build the town taken from it. The Kig-Yar and their Skirmisher sub-species believed in preserving nature as best they could.

It was early evening in the township, with the daily working lives of those here beginning to wind down. It was not quite so for Kal'Shayar, who had spent the last few years at his home.

Kal'Shayar was a Skirmisher, well-built with dark blue-black skin and plumes of black feathers on his head and arms. His eyes were an amber colour, with slitted pupils in the centre of each. He was dressed in a set of beige-coloured robes, fairly standard wear for a male at home. Standing on the balcony of his modest house, he regarded the view of the town below as it spread out for some distance before hitting the bright blue ocean. The sun was descending beyond the horizon, the sky a purple-orange colour and dotted with small fluffy clouds. Kal'Shayar would have been about forty-six in human years, but was as fit as many of the younger warriors. He had fought in the war, been to many different worlds and had seen much death and destruction. The last few years he had spent at home had provided him with a sense of peace, though as it continued he became gradually

overwhelmed by a feeling of uselessness. Soldiers like him were not needed anymore. He was a leftover from another era, one that had ended when the war had. Even the Covenant had gone, the Prophets retreating back to their home-world and the Sangheili becoming divided between loyalists and those who wanted to keep the peace and reform. As for the Skirmishers, worlds such as Sauem had cut all ties with the Sangheili and the humans, hoping to wait out whatever conflicts that might erupt between the fractured species. The Skirmishers were a dying breed after all and there would be no point in getting involved in another interstellar war.

Kal'Shayar had a purpose here, at least. His daughter, one of two children he had had, lay ill in a room within the house, the victim of a rare degenerative illness that had claimed the mother and was clearly hereditary. Kal'Shayar had come to terms with the situation some time before, but it still pained him to think that there was nothing that could be done. Medical science had been fairly sophisticated for the Kig-Yar, at least until the Covenant had come along and taken over, forbidding any improvements to any technology that had been reverse-engineered from the Forerunners. It had held back progress and not for the best, leading to unfortunate occurrences such as the condition of Kal'Shayar's daughter. Her name was Jeril, the name the mother's own mother had had. The family had been fractured after Kal'Shayar's female partner had died fifteen years before, leaving him to raise their son and daughter. Jeril was twenty-three in human years and near death's door, something that frustrated Kal'Shayar, as she would have had a far more fulfilling life had this disease not swept down with the intent of claiming her. The son Kal'Shayar had had was not here, having been killed five years before, just after the war had ended. He was not familiar with all of the details and he was not particularly interested, as his relationship with his son had never been very good. He had always gotten the impression that his son hated him, a culmination of not being there for him as he was always going off to war. At least his son had followed him in his footsteps in this regard, going through the gruelling training regimen at a young age to become a full-fledged warrior.

Kal'Shayar could at least rest easy for now, as Jeril was asleep, spending most of her time in bed and heavily medicated. The illness put her through a lot of pain and sometimes Kal'Shayar debated with himself whether or not it would be best if he carefully gave her too much of the medication one night, putting her to sleep for good. He knew he could never bring himself to do that to his own daughter, not after all of the death he had seen during the war. He could remember much of his actions in the war quite vividly and often had nightmares, a sure sign of post-traumatic stress disorder. He feared for his own sanity sometimes and knew that once the illness claimed Jeril, he would be alone. He had no family other than her and as much as he distrusted his son, he sometimes wondered what things had been like had they not disagreed so often. His daughter, on the other hand, had shown much promise. He had helped her with her training, up until she had started showing signs of the illness, eventually putting her in a state where she could barely stand.

Kal'Shayar continued to watch the town from his balcony while the sun set and night began to fall. There were Kig-Yar, both Skirmishers and the more common types, milling about in the streets below and on the walkways that connected some of the housings. He wondered if any of them were like him, veterans of the war and scarred both physically

and mentally from what they had been through. It was very likely there were many others like him, but for now Kal'Shayar had an ill daughter to take care of.

He turned around and walked back into his home. The main living area was mostly comprised of wooden walls and floors, supported by some metal pylons. The furniture was sparse and low to the floor, a bed in the far corner more reminiscent of a nest than an actual proper bed. His daughter was in an adjoining room behind a partially closed door and she lay in a smaller but well padded nest-like bed, fast asleep, the sheets up to her neck. Kal'Shayar approached the door, pushing it open and shifting his gaze to Jeril where she lay. Despite her condition, she looked especially peaceful, her yellow eyes closed and her plumage relaxed. Female Skirmishers were of a slightly lighter build than the males but were usually just as capable strength and speed-wise. Jeril had lost a lot of her muscle because of her condition, leaving her gaunt, her blue-black skin taking on a more greyish pallor as the illness left her feeble. Kal'Shayar set himself down in the seat by the bed, taking a look at the tomes that sat on the nightstand. Jeril was an avid reader, having little else to do now that she was bed-ridden. There were some of the older writings among the books, many concerning the history of their clan.

Kal'Shayar was familiar with some of it, having been taught such things by his strict father during his younger years. Their clan had been a very successful one prior to the Covenant's arrival, controlling large tracts of territory on Sauem and holding the rival clans at bay through superior combat ability and strategy. Once the Covenant had taken over and forced the clans to unite, Kal'Shayar's ancestors had been able to get a very high stature in the new society because of their previous gains. As the centuries went on, the clan system had gradually died out through inter-mingling and homogenisation.

Kal'Shayar put the books aside, noticing that his daughter had her eyes open. She was looking at him, giving the Skirmisher equivalent of a smile which included slightly curving the edges of her mouth at the back of her snout.

"Father," she said. "You look worried."

"I have many things on my mind," Kal'Shayar said simply. This was true, though he had been told by Jeril before that he should stop worrying about her. It was hard for him not to, as she was his own flesh and blood, a daughter whom he loved dearly and could not live without. Jeril seemed more accepting of her condition than he did, something he could not quite understand since if he had become bed-ridden and wracked with pain like her he would probably have become incredibly angry and frustrated.

"I see you have been reading about our ancestors," Kal'Shayar said, changing the subject. He did not wish to lay out his own problems on his daughter, as she was going through enough already.

"You haven't got much else in your library," she replied.

"Those volumes belonged to my father." Kal'Shayar put a clawed hand to his daughter's face, gently pushing through the plumage on her head. For females, there was not much of it, but what little there was had many shining colour streaking through. "They are very valuable, even if the truth behind the historical subject matter

within them has probably been altered somewhat. It is likely our ancestors, who wrote those volumes, painted themselves in a very positive light compared to the other clans detailed within them."

"That's part of the charm," Jeril said.

There was a lengthy pause. Kal'Shayar had recently got to thinking that he and his daughter had started running out of things to talk about. There was only so much that could be said about how she was feeling, what she wanted to do that day and whether Kal'Shayar was in any mood to talk about his experiences in the war.

"How much of the medication do you have left?" Kal'Shayar asked. There were a few vials of the drug in question sitting on the other nightstand, by the other side of the bed. "I could head into town to get some more..."

"I've got enough."

"What about the pain?"

"It's eased, not as bad as it was last week."

Kal'Shayar nodded. He was glad to hear this, that at least his daughter was getting some relief from her condition. It still frustrated him that he could do little else but give her the drugs and watch her wither away slowly, just like he had done so for her mother. It had been much the same as this with his female bond-partner, their plans to have more children being quashed by her developing this condition. When they had been told that it was hereditary it seemed unfair to risk having more children who may develop the condition, so they settled on raising the two children they already had. Kal'Shayar had gone straight back into service once his mate had died, a means of grieving on his part by focusing solely on his work as a soldier. He had done much the same when his son had been killed, even if their relationship had never been very good.

"I have a question," Jeril said, interrupting Kal'Shayar's train of thought.

"Yes?"

"It's not one you'll like, but..." She paused, pondering how to say it for a moment. Kal'Shayar waited patiently, watching her with an inquisitive gaze.

"What will you do, once I'm gone?"

Kal'Shayar said nothing for some time, keeping silent as the question sank in. They had never really spoken about this before, as it was a notion that neither of them really liked to think about, Kal'Shayar especially. He had sometimes considered it, about what he would do once the inevitable happened, whether or not it was even worthwhile continuing to live once his daughter had gone. He would become nothing more than some old warrior living by himself, a shadow of the man he used to be.

"I do not like to think about it," Kal'Shayar said. "But it is something I have had to come to terms with." He had tried all avenues

in regards to getting a treatment for Jeril but there was none. Kig-Yar medical science had been held back by the Covenant for centuries, something that sometimes made Kal'Shayar hate the Covenant. He had never been a fanatical believer in the Great Journey but he had followed orders, he had believed for a while that fighting the war against the humans was the right thing to do. Now he hated everything he had done in that war. If there was some higher power in the universe, it seemed fitting that they would punish him for his crimes by making his daughter die and filling his life with nothing but despair.

"I do not know what I will do when the inevitable happens," Kal'Shayar said. "I do know I will cherish every moment I have with you. But as for what I do after..." He trailed off and shook his head slowly. Jeril looked worried, leaning closer towards him and taking one of his hands in her own.

"I don't want you to do anything brash," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

Suicide. It was something he had occasionally pondered, but he had always come to the conclusion that it was an absolutely dishonourable and pathetic way to end one's problems. His father had been sure to instil such a belief in him, right from a young age: no matter how bad the situation might seem, it was nearly never an excuse for someone to kill themselves. At least, this was what his father told him whereas his instructors in the military said otherwise, that when captured and close to being compromised for important information by the enemy, it was best to do take one's own life rather than risk living a while longer and revealing information to the enemy.

"I will not do that," Kal'Shayar said sharply. "As painful as it would be to lose you, I will do my best to find another purpose. Currently, my only mission is to look after you."

"The physician said..."

"The physician said a lot of things," Kal'Shayar interrupted. He had told him all about Jeril's chances at life, that at most she would have six months to live. This had been seven months prior and somehow Jeril had fought to continue living past the physician's projected date of death. "I think it is best you rest now. I think I may turn in for the night myself."

"I feel better than I did yesterday," Jeril said weakly. She looked up at him with expectant eyes. "And I've known you long enough to tell what you're thinking. Sometimes you get this distant look in your eyes and then I know you're thinking about the war. You haven't told me much about what you did then, when we were fighting the humans..."

"That is because there is little to tell." Kal'Shayar knew this was a lie, as there was actually much to tell about the war. He had already shared some war stories with his daughter, tending to gloss over the nasty details. He got the impression that Jeril did not like it when he did that, as she was old enough to be told the whole truth. Still, Kal'Shayar wanted to protect her from the harsh reality. She might

have accepted her own fate, but that did not mean he had to.

"I made friends during the war and I lost most of them by the time it ended," Kal'Shayar explained. "I met your mother during the war, shortly after it had begun. We even served on the same vessel together, within the same unit."

"You've told me this before."

"I know I have." Kal'Shayar paused, thinking of what else to add. Jeril had heard the story of how he and her mother had met countless times. Jeril had been very young when her mother had died and had few clear memories of her.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a loud knocking on the front door. Kal'Shayar rose out of his chair, surprised that anyone would be visiting him at this hour. He had a few acquaintances within the township but he doubted any of them would bother coming to visit him, unless it was about something important. Jeril lay back in her bed and watched her father leave the room, half-drowsy as a result of the medication.

The front door was in a small partitioned hall by the main living area. Kal'Shayar stopped by the door, unlocking it before opening it slowly. He did not really know who to expect, so the Skirmisher standing outside did take him by surprise once he realized who it was. The physical appearance was one thing and the scent he recognized immediately.

Lev'Kanar was twenty-six in human years, well-built and with eyes very much the same as his father's. Kal'Shayar had for all intents and purposes written off his son after hearing of his death five years ago, so it was quite a shock to see him standing in the doorway, outfitted in a grey and beige padded armour suit sans helmet. He carried a few new scars and had obviously grown somewhat since his apparent death. There was one scar down one side of his face that stood out, as if someone had tried slashing him with a knife and very much succeeded.

Kal'Shayar was stunned enough to stand there, mouth slightly agape as Lev'Kanar gave a slight grin, upturning his mouth at one side of his snout. Lev'Kanar had always been an unruly sort of child, one who had grown into a very reckless sort of man who had done everything he could to escape from his father's shadow and make something of himself, ruining the relationship he had had with his father in the process. Now he was back, apparently having survived the raid that had cost him his life. Kal'Shayar had been through the reports about it: a human force had been actively seeking out insurgent activity and had discovered an arms depot that Lev'Kanar and a number of others had been utilizing in order to fulfil their work as pirates, raiding supply ships regardless of what species such ships belonged to. It was another of the reasons why Kal'Shayar had been disgusted with his son, to see such an able-bodied warrior turn to a life of piracy instead.

"Father," Lev'Kanar said, his voice very similar to Kal'Shayar's own.

Kal'Shayar said nothing. What could he have said? He was faced with someone whom he had accepted as being dead. There was nothing that

could be said to make meeting a figurative ghost any easier.

"It is rather cold out here." Lev'Kanar narrowed his gaze. "May I come in?"

Kal'Shayar stepped aside and gestured for his son to enter. Lev'Kanar nodded gratefully and strolled inside, his booted feet leaving dirt on the carpet as he walked. He had been through a lot, judging from his attire: all ragged pieces of clothing and some armoured padding, as if he was expecting to be shot at. He was dirtied and smelt of sweat and mud. Kal'Shayar closed the door once he had entered and turned around, watching as his son wandered into the living area.

Lev'Kanar was giving the inside of the house a very thorough look-over. He approached a small wooden table and picked up the metal sculpture that had been set upon it. It was a carefully made idol portraying one of the more notable figures from their clan, someone who had lead their clan in a major victory hundreds of years before.

"I remember this. You used to tell me stories about Salk, one of our better ancestors. Of course, they were just stories, were they not?" He put the statue down and turned around to face his father. "You were always a great liar, father."

Kal'Shayar remained silent. He had nothing to say to him. Lev'Kanar was supposed to be dead and yet here he was, alive and well. It could have been possible that Kal'Shayar was hallucinating, but this seemed far too real to be a mere hallucination. Lev'Kanar had aged in the five years he had been absent and for an apparent hallucination his ageing looked very plausible.

"Not even a simple 'hello' for your own son?" Lev'Kanar asked, raising an eyebrow ridge in an almost mocking fashion. "I almost died. But, like the stories you used to tell me when I was nothing but a fledgling, of the warriors who would be struck down in battle only to rise again, I have come back. I have risen again, and I feel better than I ever did before."

"What do you want?" Kal'Shayar asked finally, keeping his tone level.

"I want to get re-acquainted with my family." He paused, looking around the quiet interior of the home. "Simply being here brings back all sorts of memories. The smell is how I remember it, that subtle mix of wood and modern steel. Your scent is there as well, same as it has always been. And, if I am not mistaken..." His gaze went towards the door that lead into Jeril's room. "My sister is here. And from what I have been told, she is not well."

"Who have you been talking to?" Kal'Shayar asked. He felt like ordering his son out of the house. It was almost insulting, the way he had just strolled in and virtually reclaimed the place. There was something different about him, as if those five years he spent "dead" had done something to alter his personality. Either that or he had simply matured.

"I have been talking to your friends around town, father," Lev'Kanar said. He started walking to Jeril's room but Kal'Shayar stepped into

his path, blocking him access to the bedroom. Lev'Kanar stepped back for a moment, eyeing his father with what seemed to be a gaze of pity.

"You are not happy to see me, that is easy enough to tell."

"What makes you think I would be pleased to see you, after all of this time?" Kal'Shayar asked, putting his rising anger under control and keeping his tone stable. "You were a disgrace. All that potential you had, wasted. You wasted it to become a criminal. Common scum that deserve no sympathy. Your 'death' saved the family much embarrassment."

"Family?" Lev'Kanar scoffed. "What family? It is just you and my sister. No grandparents, no mother figure. You will try so hard to hold on to this 'family', yet it was gone years ago, long before I left. When mother died, something in you changed. You were around far less often, always going off to war and almost getting killed. How many different people did you entrust to take care of me and Jeril? We barely saw you. And then, when I leave and the war ends, you return. Were you really that ashamed of your own children? Of me? So much so that you were only able to put up with us when the war ended?"

"You are crossing the line..."

"I crossed the line long ago and have not looked back," Lev'Kanar interjected. "Let me see Jeril. She is my sister and I deserve to see her."

"You deserve nothing." Kal'Shayar knew that Lev'Kanar was partially true with what he was saying. After the death of his mate, Kal'Shayar had spent more time fighting in the war than he had ever been before. The condition Jeril was in may have been hereditary, but Lev'Kanar had been lucky enough to miss out on it. He seemed to be in perfect health, something that pained Kal'Shayar, as it seemed unfair on Jeril that she had been the one to get the illness in her generation.

"I have been out there, father," Lev'Kanar said. "I have visited many worlds and done many things. If you knew half of what I have achieved, you might actually be proud of me. At the very least, I would think you would let me see my sister."

"Why do you want to see her?"

"She is my sister..."

"You just appear out of nowhere on this very night, after five years of absence and now you just expect me to accept you back into this household?" Kal'Shayar's anger was seeping out of his control and spilling into his voice. Lev'Kanar was unfazed by his father's rising temper.

"You are a fool, Lev! Nothing but a reckless fool! Do you know what it was like to find out you had become a criminal?"

"No, but I can imagine." Lev'Kanar looked annoyingly smug. Kal'Shayar had the urge to lash out and hit him but held back for now, deciding it would probably be better if he did not stoop to that level. "I

disgraced the family, I embarrassed you...It is all rather obvious, is it not? At least I made a name for myself. I achieved things you would not believe. Did you know that I found a mate, father?"

"What?" Kal'Shayar had never considered this possibility. He had always liked the thought of having grandchildren.

"Eight years ago, I met a female, same age as me, on my travels. We worked together for some time and it was not long before we loved together. We had three children. Two females, one male."

"You had children?" Kal'Shayar was aghast. If he had known, he might have gone out of his way to meet them, regardless of what Lev'Kanar might have been up to at the time. Criminal activities or not, meeting his grand-children would have been worth it. "Are they here? Did you bring them with you?"

"That is the point, father." Lev'Kanar's tone became far more serious. "They are dead. They died when I did. At least, when I was reported to have been killed. I survived, but they did not. I did not tell you about them, as I assumed you would find illegitimate children somewhat disgraceful. The female and I were not properly bonded, we simply let it happen...\_accidentally\_."

"You assumed wrongly."

"That is not why I am here." Lev'Kanar peered past his father and towards Jeril's room.

Jeril's voice broke in from behind Kal'Shayar, causing him to turn around.

"Lev? Why are you here? How are you here?"

Jeril had climbed out of bed upon hearing the conversation and had shambled out of the bedroom, leaning against the wall in order to support herself. She only had some modest undergarments on, revealing her thin, weakened frame and pale skin.

"Jeril, return to your bed. You are too weak to-" Kal'Shayar began, but was interrupted.

"Father, I'm fine." Jeril said this with obvious determination and Kal'Shayar simply fell silent, deciding to let her have her own way. Lev'Kanar had stepped forwards by this point, moving in to embrace his sister. He did so and Jeril put her arms around him, holding him close for a moment.

"I missed you," Jeril said, gradually breaking out of the embrace.

"And I missed you, Jeril." Lev'Kanar gave a smile, taking a step back to regard the pair. "This is why I am here. I wished to see my sister, perhaps even more so than I wanted to see my father."

"What is that you want from her?" Kal'Shayar asked. He had calmed down a little, but was still on the verge of striking his own son.

"I wish to give her an opportunity very few have had so far. Her condition is a rare one, incurable by all accounts. However, I have the means to save her. I can save her. All you have to do is trust me with her health, father. She does not need to suffer like this."

Kal'Shayar was confused upon hearing this. What could Lev'Kanar have possibly found that could cure Jeril's condition? Her disease was hereditary, passed on from her mother's genes and developing in her early adult years. There was simply too much to take in tonight, with Lev'Kanar not being dead and apparently having had children. It was mind-boggling and Kal'Shayar was very much stunned, unable to decide how to approach the situation.

"What could you do to help her?" Kal'Shayar snapped. Jeril did not look too convinced either, as she had accepted her condition and learned to live with it. As much as she liked Lev'Kanar as her brother, she was not stupid enough to place too much faith into him after a five year absence.

"I have the means to save her."

"She is too weak to be moved," Kal'Shayar said. "You can see how she is. She has accepted her fate and she does not need you, with false promises of rescue, to disrupt that."

"You are too old-fashioned, father," Lev'Kanar said sullenly. Jeril still looked doubtful, leaning against the wall with one arm in order to stop herself from stumbling. Whatever Lev'Kanar had in mind, it could not be done. Jeril was in simply too bad a state to even go outside. "I have the means to save the life of your daughter and you would deny her that? Simply because you do not trust me?"

"I do not trust you, nor do I believe you," Kal'Shayar said. "I think it best that you leave."

"Jeril? What do you want to do?" Lev'Kanar looked at his sister, an inquisitive gaze on his face. "This is you we are talking about. Do you want to come with me? I can save your life. This much I promise."

Kal'Shayar looked at her and saw, for a moment, serious consideration on his daughter's face. However, there was little evidence to back up Lev'Kanar's claims of being able to do what he said.

"I can't," Jeril said simply. "It's hard enough to stand up here." She stumbled momentarily and Kal'Shayar was quick to grab her, putting his arms around her and holding her close. She had fallen unconscious, a result of the sheer fatigue her condition put her under and the effects of the medications she had taken.

"Leave now," Kal'Shayar snapped. Lev'Kanar watched him carry Jeril into the bedroom, setting her down in her bed before turning back to face him. "You have caused enough trouble for one evening."

"I could do it," Lev'Kanar said solemnly. "I could even show you, if you allowed it."

"Go. Now." Kal'Shayar stepped towards his son, who was level with him height-wise, and looked into his eyes sternly. "This was a terrible

way to reunite with your family."

Lev'Kanar said nothing. Instead, he started for the door, pulling it open so that the cool evening air billowed in. He stopped and looked back towards his father for a moment, slowly shaking his head.

"You will be hearing of me again soon, I think," he said, leaving Kal'Shayar slightly baffled. "And when judgement comes, I will make sure you are there to see it."

With that, he turned around and walked out, disappearing into the night, the door falling shut behind him. Kal'Shayar remained still, pondering all that had been said, running it over in his head as he tried to make sense of his unruly son's strange behaviour. It was too much to take in for one night, so with some uncertainty he began to prepare for bed. Even after all this, there were stills doubts in his mind.

### 3. Mercenary Work

\*\*Mercenary Work\*\*

January 3rd, 2558

With several others seated near him, watching him in anticipation, Kal'Shayar slowly but surely raised the glass to his mouth and tilted his head, downing the strong and intoxicating drink within seconds, his head abuzz. The other Kig-Yar seated around the table cheered in approval, some setting down yet more money as one of the older Skirmishers began to fill up another glass.

They were in one of the more popular drinking halls in Kal'Shayar's home town on Sauem. It was a fairly large affair, its interior filled with tables and chairs while drink dispensers lined the walls, attended by the hall's owner. At this time of evening there were many patrons, most of them male Kig-Yar who had come here to wind down after a long day. Many of them were from the military or training for it, easily identified by the armours they wore and the official emblems on their outfits. Kal'Shayar was outfitted in his usual beige jacket and leggings with black boots. He sat at the head of the table, only partially aware of the small crowd that had formed, focusing more on the drinks in front of him and the dozen or so empty glasses he had left. One of the more powerful Skirmisher drinks was at the centre of a popular strength and spirit test, as the drink in question was capable of causing a brief rush of euphoria that brought with it a range of different and detrimental side effects, least of all intoxication and potential psychosis. Kal'Shayar had found he could stomach a great deal of the stuff and had started making a minor living off of it, attracting the youngsters as they watched him down unlikely amounts of the narcotic beverage and probably hoped he would have a seizure or something equally entertaining (in their eyes, no less).

One of the older Skirmishers, Deval, worked here at the hall and he and Kal'Shayar had known each other for several years. He supplied the drinks, even if he found Ka'Shayar's newfound reliance on intoxicating beverages a bit disappointing. Nonetheless, keeping this entertainment going did provide some business for the hall and Deval was not going to adverse to that.

Kal'Shayar's mind, as hazy as it was getting as he continued with his current activity, was full of conflicting thoughts. He had always had his doubts, about himself and his current state of affairs, but what had tipped him into deep depression had been the death of Jeril three weeks earlier. It had been expected, and inevitable for that matter, but it had still hit him hard and he doubted he would ever recover. It was just him left in the family now, save for his son who was out somewhere in the galaxy continuing with his criminal ways. He was no proper member of the family and had ceased to be the day he had left the household several years before.

Kal'Shayar did like the attention he was getting. It helped keep his mind off of the more unfortunate things that had happened in his life recently, particularly Jeril's death. Deval slid another glass of the drink towards him and the young soldiers sitting around the table watched him in anticipation, their bets placed, some expecting him to collapse and others hoping he could continue for one more glass. Kal'Shayar took the glass in one hand, swirling its contents about before putting it to his mouth and tipping it, holding his head back as he let the warm beverage flow down his throat. There was that pleasant feeling of euphoria, one that gave him the impression that he was on top of the world, unable to be brought down by anyone or anything. It quickly ended though, a dull ache shooting through his head as the unfortunate side effects began to kick in. Regardless, he slammed the empty glass down on the table and regaled in the cheers of the soldiers around him.

Deval looked morose but began pouring him another glass. Kal'Shayar felt his stomach churn, followed by the urgent and sudden need to use the bathroom. Despite this, he remained where he sat for now, more concerned with the rather hefty amounts of money he would be making from his current activity. He had been living off of the wealth he had made during his time in the military, fighting in the war while going out on the occasional bout of privateering. Once he had relegated himself to staying at home and looking after Jeril he had been forced to constantly dig into those savings every time he needed to buy medications for his daughter, gradually eating away at what he had. He received some assistance from the government for being a war veteran and having a terminally ill daughter, but it was not enough to pay for everything. Sauem's governing body did like to paint itself as socialist, with the intent of giving everyone a fair chance, but outside of that things were very much a free-for-all, with individuals doing anything they could to get an edge, including piracy.

Kal'Shayar did not want to disappoint the soldiers sitting around him. He thought it unfortunate that he had not opted to do this sooner, when he had needed the money the most. He would spend much of what he made here on more drinks for himself, during his more private sessions spent alone at home, looking over old records of himself, his deceased mate and their daughter while he drank heavily. He was still bothered by what his son had said, when he had paid a visit some time ago, claiming he could cure Jeril. There was the distinct possibility that maybe he had been telling the truth, that perhaps Jeril could be saved through some means Lev'Kanar had discovered. It was more bothersome now since Kal'Shayar would never know if his son had been telling the truth. If he had, then his daughter had probably died for nothing. She had had much potential but the universe had decided to cut her life short for whatever unfathomable reasons it

had.

Kal'Shayar downed another one of the drinks before he really started to feel ill. Taking what money he had made from the betting, he stuffed it into his long jacket and rose out of his chair, ignoring the disappointed remarks of the young soldiers as he made his way through the mostly wooden hall and into an adjoining bathroom facility. Approaching one of the bowls, he bent over and threw up, retching while his stomach churned painfully. He felt a warm sensation at his crotch, realizing then that he had wet himself despite being mere centimetres from a perfectly good toilet.

Slumping against the wall on his left, Kal'Shayar put a hand to his face and hung his head. What good was all that money now? It seemed so pointless, with this once great warrior reduced to a drunken wreck who now sat in a puddle of his own urine. Thinking about it just frustrated him even more, with the splitting headache he was developing now just adding to the situation.

He became aware of someone standing over him. Looking up, his eyes met with Deval's, the older Skirmisher carrying a disappointed look on his face. He was about thirty years older than Kal'Shayar, but still maintained his muscular and athletic physique from his military days. The plumage on Deval's head and arms had dulled in colour, with some of it having falling out, leaving bald patches that made for a good indicator of age. Kal'Shayar had always dreaded the day he started losing his plumage.

"Get up, Kal," Deval said, putting out one hand. Kal'Shayar regarded it for a moment before putting his hand to Deval's, allowing the older warrior to help him up. Kal'Shayar had to steady himself with one arm against the wall, as his balance while back on his feet felt a bit off.

"I remember when the people here used to consider you a hero," Deval said, his voice tinged with frustration. "What changed?"

"Well..." Kal'Shayar thought about this for a moment, attempting to work out an answer to the older male's question. "The war ended. Our numbers dropped. Now Skirmishers like us are nothing but curiosities, leftover from a bygone era." He tried his best to avoid slurring his words, but it happened anyway, the drinks he had had giving him less control over his vocal chords than he would have liked. His head was throbbing painfully, causing him to put one hand to his forehead, rubbing it slowly in a futile effort to dull the pain and help him focus.

"That might be the case," Deval said. "But what kind of image do you give us, when you go out there and drink yourself into a stupor in front of all those impressionable young soldiers? Should we not be trying to give ourselves a better image? Instead of being, as you said, mere 'curiosities'?"

"Do you not know what I have been through?" Kal'Shayar narrowed his gaze towards the older male, some anger creeping into his voice.

"I know exactly what has happened. You told me yourself and I empathize. I have been through just as much, perhaps even more considering how much longer I have been around compared to you. I

lost my mate early in the war, my children years later. That war affected us all. For it to end the way it did, for us to find out we had fought it for no reason other than to follow the orders of the misguided Prophets..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "It still angers me to this day. All that suffering while really we could have been cooperating with the humans, benefiting both of our races."

Kal'Shayar took his hand away from his head, focusing on Deval. The old warrior was clearly trying to help, but Kal'Shayar felt that he did not need it.

"What is your point?"

"My point is that I hate seeing you the way you are now." Deval put his hands to Kal'Shayar's shoulders, looking him directly in the eyes. "You are better than this, far better. You should find some other outlet for your problems, rather than come here and drown your sorrows in some attempt to make people feel sorry for you. The reason those Kig-Yar out there watch you and makes bets to see how long you will last are there not because they see a great soldier, a great warrior, testing his strength and spirit. No, they see a pathetic, washed-out war veteran who has nothing to lose and they hope that maybe he keels over and has a seizure, since at least then it will be quality entertainment."

Kal'Shayar had thought this might be the truth, but he had not really cared, at least not until now when someone else highlighted the fact for him. He knew what he had become and hated it, his self-loathing only encouraging him to stay at home more often and occasionally consider killing himself. There was no honour in doing so, but the prospect did have some appeal. He had nothing left to live for, with his family all but gone. The afterlife, however it may be like, may provide some means for him to meet his mate and daughter again.

Deval took a step back, taking his hands off of Kal'Shayar's shoulders, his face contorted in the Skirmisher equivalent of a frown.

"When your mate died, you went straight back into the war as a means to deal with your grief," Deval said. "Now that there is no war on, there is not much else you can do to deal with the loss of your daughter. You say you have a son..."

"He stopped being part of my family years ago," Kal'Shayar interrupted.

"Perhaps you should find him? He is still your son, despite the wrongs he may have committed."

Kal'Shayar had never considered this, mostly because he had no interest in finding his unruly son and seeing him again.

"No," he said simply.

"As you wish, Kal," Deval said. "I still think it would be for the best if you did attempt to reconcile with him."

"I think we are done here." Kal'Shayar straightened himself and

started for the door, with Deval following close behind. "Just so you know, I will not be coming back here again. I suddenly do not wish to become an entertainment item to the other Kig-Yar."

"Are you just going to shut yourself into your home now?" Deval frowned. "I do not recommend that. Becoming a recluse is not what I was trying to suggest."

"Why do you care so much, Deval?"

Deval reached out and put a hand to Kal'Shayar's shoulder, stopping him in his tracks with his vice-like grip. Kal'Shayar turned around to face him, noticing the solemn gaze that had appeared on Deval's face, along with the subtle changes in his scent that indicated a change to a more sullen mood.

"You remind me of myself, at a younger age," Deval said. "When I lost my mate, my children, I became much the same as you have. But unlike you, I renewed my purpose in life. I set up this hall for instance, bringing together Kig-Yar from all around the township, providing a place for recreation and socialising. I honour the memories of my lost loved ones, but I also get on with my own life. They live on in the memories I have of them. We Skirmishers are a dying breed and it pains me to see one become such a shadow of his former self. I understand what you are going through, but I think it is time you got on with your life. Do not become hung up on the past. Cherish the memories you have of your family, but do not let them interfere with the way you live. Do you really think that this is what your mate would have wanted? Do you really think this is what your daughter would have wanted? To see their father reduced to this?"

Kal'Shayar had heard enough. He continued walking, knowing full well that Deval had made a very valid point. There was no way that his mate or Jeril would have wanted to see him the way he was now, swallowed up by depression and stumbling around as a drunk. Even so, he had tired of Deval attempting to preach to him.

He made his way through the hall, passing Skirmishers and ordinary Kig-Yar alike. Deval followed him all the way to the main entrance, the double doors opening automatically as he approached. Outside, the town was quiet, the sky above dark. The planet's two moons appeared as two waxy cratered spheres amongst the blue-black carpet of twinkling stars.

The hall was located on an upper level of one of the main buildings, overlooking a wide and busy street though at this time of night the amount of activity down there was minimal.

"What are you going to do, Kal?" Deval asked from the doorway as Kal'Shayar walked out onto the front balcony. A walkway nearby lead to one of the buildings across the stone-tiled street. There were sheltered walkways that ran all throughout town, providing a decent means for Kal'Shayar to get home.

"I will remember what you said," Kal'Shayar said, stopping and turning to look at the older male. "Anymore than that and I cannot make any guarantees."

Deval nodded in understanding before he stepped back into the hall and closed the door. Kal'Shayar closed his jacket against the cool

evening air and started on his way home.

\* \* \*

><p>Returning home, Kal'Shayar was immediately alerted by the fact that the front door was partially open, despite distinctly recalling locking it before leaving earlier in the evening. Still muddled after his binge drinking, he found it difficult to get as alert and prepared as his training would otherwise allow him to. Instead, he somewhat foolishly barged through the open door, entering the dimly lit living area and doing his best to survey the interior in order to locate whatever else was out of the ordinary.</p>

Kal'Shayar saw a large figure sitting on one of the stools at the far end of the room, watching him from the shadows, silhouetted against the moonlight streaming in through the window. The figure was certainly no Kig-Yar, Skirmisher or otherwise which did cause Kal'Shayar to tense up considerably. Not many non Kig-Yar came to Sauem, save the odd human trader or diplomat. Kal'Shayar felt so foolish, knowing just how incapable he was of defending himself in his current state and yet standing here looking at the intruder and making himself open to attack.

The attack he thought would occur never came. Rather, he was able to find his way to a panel by the door, running his hand by the sensor contained within which in turn activated the lights. The lights spaced-out on the room's ceiling came on, casting a white glow across the room that revealed the identity of the intruder.

Sitting in one of the larger chairs yet still looking a bit squeezed into its narrow frame was a Sangheili. It was hard to mistake them, with their bulky frames, hoofed feet and split-hinged jaw, comprised of four mandibles lined with teeth. This Sangheili was one that Kal'Shayar recognized, the emerald green eyes being a telltale sign of this alien's identity. The Sangheili was outfitted in crimson red armour, sans helmet. That helmet sat on a table a short distance from where he sat.

"Minor Wittronee?" Kal'Shayar said with recognition. He relaxed somewhat, knowing there was very little threat to be had from this particular male Sangheili.

"It is 'Major' now," the Sangheili said. "And just 'Wittron'. We all shed the 'ee'-suffix when the Covenant was disbanded."

Jerashar Wittron rose from the chair, regarding Kal'Shayar with a careful gaze. It was sometimes difficult to read the expression on a Sangheili, as their facial body language was quite different to that of a Kig-Yar. Even so, Kal'Shayar thought that he could see a degree of friendly warmth on the alien's face.

"It has been a long time," Jerashar said. He approached Kal'Shayar, towering over the Skirmisher by over two feet. "When was the last time we fought together? Was it at Reach?"

"Yes, that was it," Kal'Shayar said. "Why are you here? And how did you get into my house?"

"The door was unlocked," Jerashar said. Kal'Shayar thought he had locked it, but he supposed it was likely he had forgotten, something

that was all the more likely given the current state of his mind and the stresses he had been under. It was very easy to forget things with so much on his mind.

"I knew that you were here, in this town," Jerashar continued, "So I decided to wait here for you. As for why I am actually here..." He paused, briefly giving this some thought. "I will get to that soon enough. For now, I think it would be best if we spoke as friends."

"You came all the way to Sauem just to see me?" Kal'Shayar asked, frowning. The relations between the former Covenant races were very iffy in places, and the superior attitudes many Sangheili had, seeing themselves as above the Kig-Yar had caused much resentment between the two species. Jerashar was not like that, having been a young soldier when Kal'Shayar had met him, inexperienced but very much able to hold his own. They had served together for a few years, fighting alongside on the human world of Reach as part of the invasion. The fighting there had been some of the most horrific for both sides and at one point, Jerashar and Kal'Shayar had been the only two survivors from their unit, stranded in enemy controlled territory.

"Yes, in a way," Jerashar replied. "I do wish to discuss something important to you, but I feel that we could at least converse as friends prior to reaching that matter." He paused, regarding Kal'Shayar's rugged appearance with some concern. "We do you smell like urine?"

Kal'Shayar was caught off-guard by the question, recalling how he had wet himself back at the community hall.

"It is...it is nothing."

Jerashar did not look convinced but pressed the matter no further.

"Do you want anything to drink?" Kal'Shayar asked. "I do not have any Sangheili liquor, but perhaps some water, at the very least?"

"I am fine without it," Jerashar answered.

Kal'Shayar made his way to one of the chairs in the living area and sat himself down. His headache had eased slightly during the walk home and now he was set with cravings for more liquor, the sort he knew it better to just ignore no matter powerful they got. He had had more than enough to drink and he still had what Deval had said to stew over. He had very much been right with most of what he had told Kal'Shayar, that drinking himself close to death was probably something neither his deceased mate nor Jeril would have wanted him to do.

"This is a fine house you have," Jerashar said, glancing around the room. "It is modest, in its appeal. Certainly smaller than a Sangheili home, but we need more room than your kind. Does anyone live with you?" He paused, remembering what Kal'Shayar had told him about himself, several years earlier. "How is the family? You told me you had a daughter?"

Kal'Shayar closed his eyes for a moment, thinking he should have expected the topic to come up. He opened them and looked straight at

Jerashar, weary from having to talk about this to just about everyone he met.

"My daughter died several weeks ago. It is just me here now, no one else."

Jerashar was silent, sitting himself back into the chair. It creaked under his weight but otherwise held together. Such a chair was not built to contain a Sangheili's size effectively.

"I am sorry to hear that," Jerashar said.

Kal'Shayar had neglected to tell the Sangheili that he had a son, so Jerashar did not have any reason to ask about Lev'Kanar. This gave Kal'Shayar some relief, as he would not need to discuss how much of a disgrace he thought his son had become, especially considering the last time he had seen him. Now, he could relax in the fact that he had some friends left in the galaxy, Jerashar being one of them. The two had shared stories during their time serving together, learning much from each other about the other's race and culture. There were just as many similarities as there were differences between the cultures, though the Sangheili had always been far more religious. The reveal that the entire religion was based on lies given by the Prophets had shattered Sangheili society, dividing it and causing much strife. Kig-Yar, Skirmishers included, had never been as religious and such a revelation had not affected them as harshly.

"What about you, Major?" Kal'Shayar asked, curious. "Do you have a family? A wife? Children?"

"I was married three years ago. It was arranged by my wife's father, who sought to marry her daughter into a better regarded bloodline."

"Yours?"

"Yes. Believe it or not, but the Wittron line is actually fairly respected on Sanghelios, something I did not even know myself until I was notified about the arranged marriage. As for the woman, I was expecting myself to dislike having someone whom I had never met before made to marry me, but she and I actually got along quite well. We have a son now who is only two years of age." Jerashar sounded understandably pleased as he said all this, no doubt happy with the state his life was in. "I doubt I could have had a family if the war was still on. All the times I almost died during it..." He shook his head. "It makes me realize how lucky I am to be where I am now."

"And what exactly are you doing now?" Kal'Shayar stowed all feelings of envy towards Jerashar's clearly happy life. It was childish to have such thoughts, but they were there nonetheless. Jerashar had always struck Kal'Shayar as a bit naive, but this was not necessarily a bad thing. The Sangheili was of a younger generation, one which had questioned the reason why the humans were being fought. Clearly they had been right all along. He had been raised to consider humans the ultimate enemy, but despite this indoctrination he had never quite accepted these teachings.

"I serve Field Marshall Rel Valum," Jerashar said. "We work to defend

Sanghelios and its colonies from outside threats, whatever they may be. Our home-world is on the brink of civil war, but the Field Marshall considers what lies outside of our sphere of influence to contain the real threats. He is a fine leader and all those who serve him, myself included, respect him greatly. Our most recent endeavours have been to work with the humans in subduing Covenant loyalists, as they have been gaining strength in the last year or so."

"There are still loyalists?" Kal'Shayar was surprised to hear this. He had assumed most loyalty to the old Covenant had died when the war had ended. Clearly he had been wrong, but he assumed many of the loyalists were Sangheili considering how fanatically devout many of them had been to the Covenant religion.

"There will always be loyalists," Jerashar said. "We work with the humans to eliminate them, but no matter how hard we try and how successful we are, there are always more of them. Sometimes I think they simply gain more followers with each passing day. It is a definite concern, as such a force could upset the delicate peace between our race and the humans."

"It sounds serious." Kal'Shayar felt tired, probably a result of all that he had had to drink earlier in the evening. Even so, he kept himself awake, keen to hear what Jerashar had to say.

"This leads into why I came here," Jerashar said. "Not simply to see you, though once I learned that you were still alive I thought it worthwhile to come by, but because of more recent events. Loyalists are one of our main concerns at the moment, but there are other threats and our manpower, with all that is happening on our home-world, has become stretched thin."

Kal'Shayar had a feeling about where this was going. Even so, he remained silent, allowing Jerashar to continue.

"In a few days we will be heading to a human world in order to work directly with one of their Generals. We will be working to combat a new threat that could affect both of our races."

"What kind of threat are we talking about?"

"It is not something we are completely certain of," Jerashar said, narrowing his gaze. "However, the Field Marshall has specifically asked me to put together a team of those I can trust. That is why I am here. I want you to be on this team."

Kal'Shayar said nothing for a moment, finding the sudden offer a bit off-putting. He had been quite resigned to his life here, spending his days locked up in his home and probably drinking himself to death. Now here was an old friend of his offering to make him part of some clandestine operation and Kal'Shayar was honestly quite conflicted on whether he should accept the offer or not.

"I know it may seem to be sudden, but the whole affair has happened very quickly," Jerashar explained, noticing Kal'Shayar's conflicted expression. "There has been a movement building, one that none of us know much about other than the fact it seems intent on disrupting the very peace that has existed for the last several years. They are not loyalists from what has been uncovered, but just as dangerous."

"And you want me to be part of this team of yours?"

"I trust you," the Sangheili said sincerely. "And that is what I need. People I can trust completely. You have had no affiliations with any major organizations for several years now. You have no potential ties to the people we will be fighting. Add to this your combat abilities and you are a perfect candidate."

"And you said we will be working with humans?"

"Yes. Is that a problem?" Jerashar raised an eyebrow ridge in a curious manner.

Kal'Shayar shook his head. He had no real problems with humans, having learned to put aside the fact that they had been the ones to kill a number of his friends during the war. He had killed plenty of humans in return, but the reality was that they had all been following orders and fighting to defend themselves. He had not been like other Kig-Yar, Skirmisher and not, who had actually enjoyed the killing, some having gone as far as to eat those they had slain.

"No, no it is not," Kal'Shayar replied. "But what exactly kind of threat are we talking about? What kind of movement?"

"As I said, one that seems intent on upsetting the peace. Tensions between races are fairly high and always have been since the war. All it takes is for someone to take advantage of this in order to ignite another war. Our human associates have told us that recent events have transpired that could have an effect on our section of the galaxy as a whole. We need to work together to fight this foe, and as all races are involved, there is no single one we can completely rely on. I need people in my team that I can personally trust, such as yourself. I have already chosen several others."

"Then why do you need me?"

"You are a friend, Kal'Shayar. And judging from your current state of affairs, I would even go so far as to say that you need the work."

Kal'Shayar knew this was true. It would help get his mind off of recent events and would certainly be better than staying at home and becoming some kind of recluse. As for the vague nature of the work, he was not bothered much by it. It was likely he would be properly briefed when he was actually an official member of the "team". Jerashar seemed sincere in what he was saying and Kal'Shayar knew him well enough to know that he would not lie. Jerashar was quite honest, as most Sangheili were. If there was some dangerous movement out there growing in strength and threatening the peace then Kal'Shayar would do well to fight it.

"I have not exercised my combat skills for years now," Kal'Shayar said. This was true: though he had worked to keep himself fit up until the death of his daughter, he had not properly trained ever since the war had ended. "It is likely I will not be as good as I used to be."

"You never forget the skills you are taught," Jerashar countered. "I am certain you will regain whatever ability you may have lost after

some training."

"Maybe," Kal'Shayar said. He had more or less decided to take up Jerashar's offer, feeling slightly relieved it had come when it had. He may very well have continued on his downward spiral otherwise, further bringing himself closer to dying alone and locked up in his home, a shadow of his former self. His mate and daughter would have been pleased to see he would be making something of himself again, if they had still been here.

"So, you have decided, then?" Jerashar asked.

"I do not have many other alternatives," Kal'Shayar said drily. "I have nothing left for me here, but the problems the galaxy is facing do not really concern me much at all. However, at the very least, I will be able to make something of myself again."

"It is settled," Jerashar said, rising out of his chair. Kal'Shayar was not sure on the exact nature of what he had gotten himself into, but stood up anyway, watching as Jerashar gave a normal Sangheili salute. "You should start packing what you wish to take with you. It could be many months, maybe even a few years, before it is over."

Kal'Shayar nodded. He had little to pack, save for some holographic recordings of his family. Entering his bedroom with conflicting thoughts racing through his mind, he set himself down on the bed and promptly fell asleep, much to Jerashar's disdain. Regardless, the Sangheili let him spend another night on Sauem as it was clear to him that Kal'Shayar was in a questionable state.

#### 4. Caine

\*\*Caine\*\*

January 15th, 2558

The Pike's Creek New Reservation area was one of the more recent re-settling points on Reach. The planet had been devastated during the war, much of the surface having been bombarded from orbit, entire population centres reduced to molten glass. The end of the Human-Covenant war had provided opportunities for worlds previously attacked to be rebuilt, and Reach had once been an important hub of military and economic traffic, sitting on a direct slip-space route to Earth. It seemed logical to start here, as well as the other Inner Colony worlds that had been attacked by the Covenant during the war. Pike's Creek was exactly that: a creek that ran through a forested valley, one that had been relatively untouched by the Covenant. The 'Pike' part of the name came from a Colonel Philip Pike, a war-hero who had lost his life during the Battle of Reach but had distinguished himself enough for a whole new settlement to be named after him.

The valley was oddly tranquil, walled in by steep and sweeping mountains with forests growing out towards the horizon, interspersed with rivers and narrower streams. The settlement was fairly small, mostly comprised of prefab buildings save for the military base at its edge which had developed into a more permanent complex. There was even an airstrip, with training flights regularly held in the skies

above. A stone statue stood at the base's entrance, commemorating the fallen Colonel Pike and the rest of his unit, who had made a valiant final stand in the region against a far larger Covenant force. They had fought tooth and nail for the very ground the settlement had been built on, but had ultimately fallen, along with the rest of the planet.

The military base's main administration building was fairly large, comprised of stone and steel, with an official looking set of front steps that lead to a pair of glass double-doors. Just through these doors was a security checkpoint and beyond that the main reception desk. There were offices on the floor above, with the ground floor left to the civilian heads of the settlement who used the building as their own governmental office.

One of the larger offices sat on the second floor at the rear of the building, overlooking the parade ground and barracks facilities. It was lavishly decorated, with some framed paintings and certificates on the walls as well as a pair of glass cabinets containing several trophies of differing shapes and sizes. If one were to go by the interior of the office in order to judge the man who worked within in, they would probably assume that this man was very wealthy, very influential and one who sought out any souvenirs during the war. They would be correct, as not only did General Nathaniel Caine have some very expensive tastes (and the wealth to go with it) but he had gathered himself a private collection of weapons and other odds and ends over the course of his life, most of which were stored away at a private estate on another one of the Inner Colonies, Valhalla, the world where he had been born and raised. The man himself sat at the mahogany desk, dressed in the green General's outfit of the Marines, with multi-coloured medal bands sewed onto his jacket. He was not solely with the Marines anymore, being the Commandant of the entire base. He had the final say on everything that occurred here and carried much power over the civilian government. In essence, he was the one in charge of New Reach (as it had become unofficially known), particularly the Pike's Creek region. He had been the one to suggest the name, considering it a reminder of the sacrifices given in order to ensure that humanity had actually received a chance to rebuild.

It was about ten o'clock in the morning local time, a part of the General's day that was usually taken up with paperwork. Much of his job revolved around it and though he found it dull, the pay and prestige that came with his position here made it well worth it. He had been a General for about four years, a veteran of not only the Human-Covenant war but of the insurrections that had occurred beforehand and during it. To him, war was employment and a very fulfilling sort of employment at that. It was men like him who always found themselves feeling useless during peace-time.

This was part of the reason why he had decided to take charge of the operation being held to put down the more recent insurgent activity. Compound this with the incident that had occurred over Earth a few months ago and recent weeks had seen the General's paperwork becoming considerably more interesting. It had gone from basic base operations to him signing off on clandestine operations in Sangheili and Kig-Yar space. That was the sort of thing he liked, though he found it unfortunate that his position and workload made it virtually impossible for him to actually go out on these missions. He was a desk commander now, seeing off subordinates into missions that may

very well lead to their deaths. It was rather detached, as he rarely ever saw the people he was apparently sending orders to, so if they ever got killed he never actually saw their faces and thus the effects of their death(s) would be very muted. It was a vast contrast to being a squad leader during the jungle fighting on Jericho III, where he knew the men and women who died under his command, often considering them friends, making their deaths all the more harder to bear.

Caine had recently been given the responsibility of putting together a new taskforce, an operation sanctioned by those even higher up than him. They were the Admirals who sat in their boardrooms, talking in muted tones and making decisions that affected the UNSC as a whole. Such decisions could very well shape the future of humanity and Caine sometimes wondered how people in such positions could possibly cope with the responsibilities they had.

There was more paperwork in front of him, although paper in this day and age was practically obsolete, leaving such "paper-work" to be left on electronic data-pads. Paper was something that had a niche appeal, especially to those who favoured traditional books and not the electronic ones so readily available in this day and age.

The information on the current data-pad had to do with sanctioning a surveillance operation in a nearby sector, where insurgent activity had been reported. Caine had no qualms signing off on this, seeing the insurgents as a nuisance that was best to be put down before it exploded into something far worse, such as another civil war. Sending off the signed form (electronically, of course) he took a moment to lean back in his chair, flexing the muscles in his neck before opening one of the drawers in his desk. There was a box of expensive and old-fashioned cigars inside, ones that had actually been manufactured in Cuba and not just some cheap imitations from a backwoods colony world. It had been difficult getting them shipped here and very expensive but Caine was not one to settle on some sub-par imitation when he had the power to have the real thing sent to him. With both hands he flipped open the steel case, noting that there were about a dozen of the cigars left. He took out one, cut off the tip with the cutter that was contained in the case's lid and stuck the appropriate end into his mouth. He closed the case and then the drawer, hearing them plonk shut satisfactorily before he pulled a lighter from one pocket in his jacket. It was engraved with his grand-father's name, a relic from some conflict that had happened a century before. He lit his cigar before placing the lighter back into his jacket pocket, giving the cigar a heavy puff before he sat back in his leather chair and let the smoke waft towards the ceiling above him.

A buzzing sound emanated from somewhere near the door. Caine looked towards it, having expected a visitor at about this time.

"Come in," he said aloud, his voice authoritative and completely level. It was a voice that was capable of turning heads and was one thing that had helped him to rise through the ranks. People listened to him, even more so now that he was a General.

The wooden door was pushed open and the large and muscular figure that had been waiting behind stepped inside. The figure in question stood over seven feet tall, outfitted in a perfectly maintained Navy uniform, carrying the rank of Commander. She had her hands behind her

back, standing up straight in typical military posture. Her dark blonde hair was short, but far from crew-cut, carrying a medium-length that ended shortly above her shoulders. Her eyes were a piercing blue colour and her skin somewhat pale, a side effect of spending a great deal of her time in MJOLNIR armour.

"You called for me, General?" She asked, popping a quick salute.

"Yes, yes I did." Caine took the cigar from his mouth, watching as the door fell shut behind the Lieutenant-Commander. "You are aware of the new team I've been instructed to form?"

Spartan-049, named 'Serena', was one of the last few remaining Spartan-IIIs. There had not been very many of them to begin with, and their numbers had dropped sharply during the war. Serena had been sent off, early in the war, to conduct some very clandestine missions that had seen her entire squad killed off over time before she had finally fallen under Caine's command in the last five years of the war. The pair were friends, even if Serena was very good at hiding this fact, doing well at hiding her emotions completely even during strenuous circumstances. She was also very loyal, never disobeying orders and very rarely questioning them.

"I am aware of it, sir," Serena said in reply to the General. Her voice was strong, if a little croaky after so much yelling within combat situations. She carried scars, a few on her face and neck, some difficult to see because of reconstructive surgery. They were there alright, having been received in past battles.

"I thought you might like to know that a great deal of progress had been made, in regards to it," Caine said. "I'm thinking that perhaps you would make a fine team lead, under my command of course. As for the field work that would entail, you are a perfect candidate. Your experience, your command abilities...There is no one else I would rather have in charge of it."

Serena gave a slight nod in acknowledgement.

"I've put together a list of candidates for other team members," Caine said. He opened a drawer at his desk, retrieving a data-pad that he then handed to Serena. She took it with one hand, scanning the information on it quickly but carefully.

Caine put a hand through his short greying hair as he waited. He had a green peaked cap sitting on the desk just to his left, part of his overall attire. It was not something he wore often, saving it for parade and official purposes rather than an actual means of protecting his head from the sun. As for his face, he caught a look at himself in the reflection on one of the glass cabinets on the wall to his left. He was in peak physical condition, a man in his late fifties with an athletic and muscular build with dull blue eyes and weathered features, caused more by his experiences in the war than by actual ageing.

He returned his gaze to Serena, who had lowered the data-pad and was eyeing the General in an inquisitive fashion.

"Colonel Paul Green?" She asked, a look of doubt crossing her features. "He outranks me..."

"Rank isn't a major factor here, Serena," Caine said. "If I say you're going to be in charge, that means you're going to be in charge."

"What about his background? A former insurrectionist?"

"That's all in the past, Serena."

Serena nodded. Caine was yet to properly form the team, having expected to have had some more time before it was needed. However, certain things had come up recently that had spurred him into action sooner than he had planned.

"And Commander Elise McGillon?" Serena paused, slowly shaking her head. "Why her? She would not have been my choice for such an important operation. She has...\_tendencies\_."

Caine raised an eyebrow when he heard this. He grinned and leaned forwards a little, still holding a smoking cigar in his left hand.

"Tendencies? Care to elaborate on that?"

"You've read her record, sir. She's very well known for disobeying orders and being guided more by emotion than by rationality."

Caine leaned back in his chair again, still grinning. He had made his choices very carefully but he should have expected someone as by-the-book as Serena to criticize them.

"Commander McGillon is an able officer," Caine said. "You described the things I like about her. She may be unpredictable, but I know you can keep her under control."

Serena glanced down at the data-pad again, reading what was left on it briefly before returning her gaze to Caine.

"And Leon, sir?" She was once again unconvinced.

"If he's in enough shape," Caine replied. "I need the best on this team, Serena. And he's one of the best."

"Not good enough to not get himself crippled," Serena commented harshly. "I don't understand why you would even bother with him."

"The connection is one reason why," Caine said. He puffed on his cigar again, giving the matter some thought. The details as to the purpose of the team were somewhat sketchy, but nonetheless he had been sanctioned to do it and he would do exactly that. "We're looking for an Artificial Intelligence, one that was stolen in a carefully planned operation conducted by what is believed to be some kind of alien insurrectionist movement. Now, we're not sure exactly who they are, but they're clearly dangerous. They've been at large for God only knows how long and have been involved in multiple incidents across the frontier. That's why we're putting this team together, to stop these criminals from causing any serious damage. With one of our military AIs at their disposal, they could wreak all sorts of havoc."

"I doubt they would be able to utilize it," Serena said. "AIs have many different and multi-layered security protocols."

"That they do," Caine replied. "However, can we really afford to just sit back and hope these terrorists aren't smart enough to figure out a way past them?"

Serena shook her head. She knew the dangers as well as he did.

"What kind of terrorists are we talking about, sir?"

Caine was not too sure of this himself, despite the reading he had done on the subject. The end of the war had seen much chaos with some of the other races, particularly the Sangheili who had fractured into several different factions. Judging from reports from the botched operation on New Sanctuary where Leon had met his unfortunate fate, it appeared that they were dealing with something more than Sangheili.

"Aliens, most definitely," Caine said. "Sangheili and Kig-Yar in particular. Both are just as intelligent as us and powerful. If we've got terrorist elements from both working with each other then there is substantial cause for concern."

"Do you want me to assemble the team, sir?" Serena asked.

"Not just yet. I'm still waiting on important reports from High Command. Apparently something very important has come up, but they're yet to tell me what exactly."

Serena nodded, handing the data-pad back to Caine. He placed it back upon his desk, taking the moment to make another drag on his cigar. There was a brief silence between the two of them, leaving Caine to think about the whole situation and why the team was needed. He remembered an important detail, one he had not given a whole lot of thought to until recently.

"One other thing," Caine said.

"What is it, sir?"

"We'll be working with some aliens on this one." He stated this rather nonchalantly, not at all bothered by the fact. Serena screwed up her face for a second but quickly lost the surprised and disgusted look, returning it to a more normal neutral expression.

"Aliens, sir?" She sounded unsure, and understandably so. The very aliens in question were from the same species that had almost destroyed humanity less than a decade ago.

"A special team, from what I've been told," Caine said. "Sangheili and Kig-Yar. They're just as concerned about these terrorists as much as us. They don't want the peace being upset, the Kig-Yar in particular. They'd rather trade with us, open up proper diplomatic relations. They don't want a galactic incident to occur, nor do they want a new war to erupt." He paused for a moment, noting Serena's still uncertain gaze. "Do you have a problem with working with aliens, Serena?"

She shook her head.

"I'll put aside any differences," she stated sincerely. There was no doubt in Caine's mind that she would do just that. Serena usually did what she said.

"Very good," Caine said. He paused, tapping out the end of his still smoking cigar into a glass ashtray on his desk. It was an old family heirloom, that ashtray, passed on down to him by his mother, who had received it from her father. Caine was all about family and even had a coffee mug on his desk that proclaimed him to be the galaxy's greatest grandpa.

"Serena, tell me something," Caine said, narrowing his gaze at her slightly. "I'm wondering..."

"Yes, sir?"

"It's about the Spartan-IV program. I hear that they've been taking in previous Spartans. Have you ever considered joining them?"

Serena was silent for a while, giving the notion some careful thought. After the long pause, she simply shook her head.

"No, I haven't, sir," she said.

"Will you now?"

"I don't see the point, sir," Serena replied. "I'm better off here, under your command."

"Yes, that's true. Why would I want to lose my finest soldier?" Caine smiled. He and Serena had a very solid friendship, though she did not see it that way. It was more of a job to her. If he was not mistaken, she was actually very loyal to him and was yet to let him down. Having his own personal Spartan bodyguard seemed a bit self-absorbed, but it was very much a possibility for him now, considering his position.

"I hear that they can give you better enhancements," Caine continued. "It might be wise to look into that, just so you maintain peak performance."

>"Enhancements don't make the soldier, sir," Serena said. Caine just nodded in response, partially agreeing. Though he was an avid believer in the mind being a better weapon than any actual physical thing, a few performance enhancing augmentations would not hurt (figuratively speaking).<p>

"I suppose you're right," he said. "I'm not enhanced, but somehow I've managed to survive the things I've been through. It's all about fulfilling one's potential. One's own potential can be their greatest enemy, and conquering it turns it into their greatest ally or some nonsense like that." Caine laughed. "That's what one of my old instructors told me, anyway. He liked trying to be all deep and philosophical."

"I see," Serena said, remaining neutral. Caine dismissed her at that point, leaving him alone in the office, smoking on his cigar while he awaited those important reports from High Command. Knowing just how inefficient they could be sometimes, bogged down in bureaucracy, he

did not expect them to arrive for quite a while.

\* \* \*

><p>Serena had no full name and was used to merely being referred to by rank, though her friendship with Caine had strengthened enough for the General to call her by her name. She was a Spartan-II, trained from the age of seven and enhanced physically in order to become the ultimate soldier, a scheme that had seen far fewer successes compared to its failures, with most of the subjects failing to survive the augmentation process or ending up crippled. Serena had been one of the lucky few to survive it all, even the Human-Covenant war itself, while she had seen some of those she had trained with right from the beginning be killed off one-by-one. There were very few of her kind remaining now, superseded by the Spartan-IIIIs and now the Spartan-IVs.</p>

She worked hard to keep her personal feelings contained and hidden, but sometimes they broke through the surface much to her regret. The doctor on base had diagnosed her with depression and put her on powerful medications, a fact that she had kept secret from everyone else, even Caine. It was these meds that had started to upset her emotional balance, though it was a gradual process that had only recently began to become more pronounced.

Life on base was fairly routine and she spent some of her time training the new recruits, as well as going through batches of paperwork, forced into some kind of advisory role now that the war was over. She knew that High Command had no idea what to do with her, so she spent some of her spare time at the counsellor on base, attempting to work out why she had fallen into the throes of clinical depression. So far, the base counsellor (a short balding man in his seventies) had only highlighted the obvious: it was post-traumatic stress disorder, compounded by the lack of any parents (as she had been taken from them at the age of seven) and the way in which she contained her emotions that had lead to her reaching the state she was in now.

She believed that No one else needed to know her problems. She knew Caine would take it seriously enough to feel some responsibility to help her, but he had his own important work to do. For now, Serena would deal with it on her own with the resident counsellor doing little but telling her the obvious.

After leaving Caine's office, Serena had paid another visit to the counsellor which took up about an hour before she emerged and headed to the mess hall for lunch. She tended to eat alone, seating herself away from the main crowds and getting the whole meal down efficiently so she could get up and head straight back to work as soon as possible. She was surprised to see Colonel Paul Green there, as he usually stuck with his own little squad of private contractors. He was a tall man, well over six feet and well built, outfitted in a light green Army Colonel's uniform. His black hair was wavy and short, his features showing elements of some kind of European descent, with the slightly olive skin perhaps indicating some ancestors of his were from the Mediterranean, maybe Greece or Italy. Regardless of his appearance, Green carried a thick colonial accent but articulated his words carefully. He had been waiting in line at the front of the mess hall while the resident chefs dished out whatever was on the lunch menu for today.

"Lieutenant-Commander," Green said, turning around to face her. She was several inches taller than him but the height difference did not intimidate him whatsoever. Green actually seemed rather nonchalant. "Would you mind if I joined you, since I see you sit by yourself every day. I thought a good-looking woman such as you would get more attention, especially from the male residents here."

"You can sit with me if you want to, Colonel," Serena said. She did not trust Green much, but he was her superior and she had no real reason to refuse such a simple request.

Reaching the front of the line, Green picked out what foods he wanted and stuffed them onto his tray. Serena did the same before heading to her usual spot at the far corner of the mess hall. Green followed, sitting down across from her with a big grin on his face that Serena did her best to ignore.

"So, tell me Spartan," Green said, taking up one of his sandwiches in one hand, "Anything really interesting happen in your life? Or do you just sit behind a desk all day?"

Green was fairly well-known around the base for being what some would call "obnoxious" (though that was probably the more refined way of saying it). This was not the first time he had tried to talk to Serena and she doubted it would be his last. She thought of attempting to persuade Caine to remove him from the proposed team, but she knew that there was good reason as to why Caine had picked him for it.

"I train the marines," Serena said simply, her tone level.

"Is that it? Do you..." Green paused, thinking about what to add. "Do you read any books? Watch any movies? Do you Spartans actually have personalities?"

"What do you do, Colonel?" Serena asked, narrowing her gaze at him.

Green took a bite from one of his sandwiches, pieces of tuna falling out of its rear end and onto his tray. He chewed for a while as he gave the question some thought.

"All sorts of things. I'm the guy the UNSC hires when they want some real dirty work done. You've heard about all that stuff to do with the terrorists, insurgents, whatever you want to call them. The UNSC pays me to help get rid of them."

"Because you used to be one of them."

"Not exactly," Green said, sounding a little defensive. He shook his head, as if insulted by the remark. "I was a member of the F-O-C, Freedom for the Outer Colonies Party. I was a politician."

"You were also a soldier."

"Trained on Reach, no less." Green smiled. "I deserted. The UNSC was oppressing the people out on the Outer Colonies, forcing them to adhere to their rules. I simply started to speak up against this."

"You spoke up by blowing up a convoy," Serena said. She had read Green's file. He had lead a guerilla war against the UNSC years ago before giving it up when the Covenant had struck his home-world.

"I was just trying to prove a point," Green said innocently. "And besides, what does it matter now? I'm working with you guys, aren't I? The whole business with the Covenant sort of convinced me I'd be better off putting aside my differences and fighting the alien menace. And now the whole insurgency thing has started up again because there is no more alien menace. I mean, before the war, you had people killing people. During the war, you had people killing aliens and vice versa. Now we're back to people killing people. If you ask me, nothing's really changed."

Serena said nothing. Green took another bite from his tuna sandwich, speaking rather matter-of-factly between bites.

"I get paid a lot of money for what I do now. Clearing out insurgent camps. Fighting terrorism. It's a nice living." He swallowed, before stuffing the rest of the sandwich into his mouth, speaking while he chewed which caused his voice to be slightly muffled. "And you, my Spartan friend, you're just a cog in the machine that is the UNSC. They made you to fight insurrectionists, not aliens. You're about as 'noble' as me. And that ain't very noble."

"Things changed," Serena said. Green was starting to get on her nerves. The prospect of being made to work with the guy in some special team did not appeal to her whatsoever.

"Not really. We're back to how it was before the war, except we've got alien terrorists to worry about. I was reading about it on the 'net."

>"Because that's such a <em>reliable</em> source," Serena said drily.

"Uh-huh." He paused, noting her mostly neutral expression.

"Do you ever smile, Lieutenant-Commander?" He asked.

It was a valid question but not one Serena was too concerned with answering right now. Green was clearly just trying to get on her nerves and she knew that it was mostly harmless, but she could not shake the feeling of building anger inside her.

"I'm still trying to work out if you've actually got a personality," Green said. He picked up another sandwich from his tray, this time one crammed with chicken and lettuce. Biting into it, he kept his gaze towards the Spartan, watching her prod at her pile of rice with a fork.

"As I said, there's a lot of bad stuff going on out there, with these alien terrorists," Green continued. "And who better to send to fight them than someone like me, a man who used to be sort of like them, except for the fact that, you know, I'm not an alien."

"Why are you here, Colonel?" Serena asked sternly.

"What do you mean?"

"Here, sitting at this table. Have you made it your goal in life to annoy me?"

Green shook his head, but Serena was not convinced.

"I'm just trying to get to know you a bit better," he said. "I just can't help but feel sorry for a freak like you."

"A what?" Serena felt a rise of anger. She had received such insults before, but this time around she could not help but take far more notice of them. Her unbalanced emotional state most likely had something to do with it. Immediately she began to calm herself, but there was no doubt in her mind that Green had noticed the change in her tone and altered facial expression.

"Well, you've got no family, no personality, and you've been augmented," Green said. "You're a freak. It's that simple. You've spent so much of your time in that suit of armour of yours that it's made you pale as a ghost. Do you have any friends at all? You're nothing without something to shoot at. Nothing but a tool used by the higher-ups for the suicide missions."

Serena was silent for a moment, considering her options. It was probably best she did not have some kind of outburst, as this would only satisfy Green and make a fool of herself. The anger was there, ready to come out. Years of being an outcast because of what she was had finally started to catch up with her.

"Get out of here, Colonel," she said, slowing her breathing in an attempt to calm herself. Green had not noticed and simply gave an innocent look when she said this.

"What was that?" Green asked. "Last time I checked, I outranked."

"And the General and I are very good friends," Serena answered. "I doubt he'd appreciate it if he found you here, acting like a complete ass."

Green raised an eyebrow at the remark but got the message, deciding it better not to completely piss off the Spartan. He rose out of his chair and took his tray, giving a mock salute to her before he turned and walked away. This left Serena alone, something that she was used to and very much preferred given Green's behaviour.

The anger building within her had eased, allowing her to relax so she could get started on her lunch properly. If Green was to be in this new team, he would need some serious discipline. She wondered if his 'Colonel' title was not some fraudulent one he had given himself during his days as a rebel, as it seemed likely he had merely called himself that in order to get better respected. It was something she would have to look into before putting the team together and would certainly give her some power over Green.

## 5. Valerie

\*\*Valerie\*\*

January 15th, 2558

Of the many facilities within the Pike's Creek military base, a large clinic was one of them, located on eastern edge of the compound. It was three floors high and contained much sophisticated medical equipment, along with the appropriate services that came with such a place. The clinic was relegated mostly for use by military personnel, though civilians were occasionally brought in if the local civilian hospital did not have the adequate resources to tend to their injuries and illnesses.

The interior of the clinic was typical of a hospital, with sterilized white and grey rooms with musty open recreational areas where patients could interact and find some means to pass the time. There were surgical facilities on the upper floor while the more standard patient wings were located on the floor below. The ground floor contained many of the staff offices as well as a large recreation area full of seats and tables, each wall having a vid-screen set upon it. The windows here looked out onto the compound, as well as the hills beyond. It gave the impression that the clinic was not some isolated place but part of the landscape itself, helping ease that feeling of alienation some patients often felt when being holed up in a hospital for extended periods.

It was midday, with the sun at its highest point, light streaming through the blinds on the windows. The main recreation area had over a dozen patients scattered about, including a few marines seated at one table by the corner, bandages on their arms and parts of their faces while they used their mostly intact eyes to watch the vid-screens. There was a middle-aged war veteran seated in a wheelchair at the other side of the room, staring out of one of the windows, his left leg a sturdy metal one, a result of an explosion some years before. There were a few nurses on duty here, keeping an eye on the patients but more interested in their own conversations; three of them had grouped by the double doors that lead to the main ward and were talking quietly amongst themselves.

First Lieutenant A-079, or 'Leon' as his more ordinary name went, sat in one of the sofa chairs at the back of the room, pondering his next move. It had taken some effort to get from his room and to here without the aid of his crutches. The pain at his lower back made the prospect of walking anywhere else a none too appealing one. It was about time for his daily dose of medication, something his nurse had not forgotten as she had plonked a few tablets into a small plastic cup and handed it to him moments before. He still held it in his left hand, taking his time to decide whether it was worth swallowing them or not. He hated the idea of being forced to take these drugs, preferring to get himself back into proper physical shape than let any chemical mix do the work for him. It may be why his recovery had taken longer than it should have and why so many of the doctors and nurses here hated him, especially considering the trouble he had caused for them during his lengthy stay here. Spartans often made troublesome hospital patients, particularly ones like Leon. At least he could walk now, something that he could not have done a month ago.

It had only been through the transmitters in his armour that he had been found crippled on New Sanctuary, a result of the botched mission to recover the stolen AI from alien terrorists. For a few weeks he had been stuck in a hospital bed, barely able to move before being brought here. The UNSC did not wish to lose one of their better

soldiers (and a Spartan at that) so they had elected to put him through some radical treatments to repair his injuries. This included rebuilding the damaged parts of his spine and returning the use of his lower body which he had lost after being shot and falling about twenty metres onto solid rock. He remembered the whole ordeal rather vividly, the burning pain as a beam rifle shot had severed his spinal cord and sent him plummeting. He also remembered the gloating Skirmisher, the one who had put him into this sorry state...

The paper cup containing his pills was now crushed in his hand, the pills within reduced to a fine white powder. Simply thinking about the culprit unearthed a rage within him that threatened to spill out, one he did his best to contain. He knew better than to erupt into a violent outburst, as he did not wish to harm anyone here. He would much rather save his anger for the enemy, whoever they were. That was another thing that angered him: he did not know who he was supposed to be fighting. The terrorists who had stolen the AI and crippled him were still unknown to him, save for the fact that they were mostly Kig-Yar. There was no indication of who they worked for, whether they had been mercenaries or part of some organization.

For all the radical surgery he had been put through, he still had some difficulty standing upright. The pain in his lower back sometimes became unbearable, but not once did he shout out. He was stronger than that, he thought this much, and he had been trained to have a higher pain threshold than most ordinary humans. It was something to do with the regenerated nerves, a side effect of the advanced treatments he had been put through that had helped rebuild them. The doctors had said he may never be rid of such pain and the best he could do was dose up on painkillers and hope for the best. He refused to take the painkillers, presumably through some sense of pride that went hand-in-hand with his increased emotional instability. Pain would make him stronger and he would need all the strength he could get in order to bring payback to the bastards who had done this to him.

For all his inner bitterness, there was at least one thing he found some comfort in. He had never been much of a sociable person, but there were people here, patients mostly, whom he had struck up very loose friendships with. They were all good people, from what he had discovered, many in the same sort of situation he was in. There was Private Lance sitting at one of the far tables, high as a kite on his daily medication but very friendly as a result. He always had some sort of goofy smile on his face, his gaze usually directed towards the ceiling. Leon made eye contact with him and the young Private gave a friendly wave, complete with dorky smile as the drugs working through his system left him feeling very pleased with himself. Leon just nodded in acknowledgement, returning his gaze to the empty space in front of him, too deep in his own thoughts to pay much attention to anything else.

Leon had had much time to himself here, plenty of time to think. He had already told himself he would seek out the people who had stolen that AI, as well as get back at the one who had crippled him. Some would call this petty revenge unbecoming of a Spartan, but despite all his enhancements, he was still human at heart. He was as flawed as everyone else and he knew this. It angered him, but it also gave him a sense of perspective. For all his abilities, he still had limits. He had been trained to be the best, becoming less of a person and more of a weapon, but to be brought down like he had been made it

clear that he was human and not infallible. Years of avoiding death despite overwhelming odds had given him a sense that he was in control, that he guided his own destiny and that nothing could stop him. His complacency had been very much shattered because of what had happened to him.

There was something else he could find comfort in. He was alerted to its presence when he saw the familiar figure walk into the room and head his way, that usual friendly grin on her face. Sergeant Valerie Nevas was a Marine, with a well-built and athletic frame, along with dark hair that was cut into a somewhat shaggy style that gave her a rugged look, almost as if she had just woken up. Her eyes were a light brown colour, her skin well-tanned from being outdoors often. She was in a hospital robe, one leg heavily bandaged, a result of an explosion that had left serious burns upon it. She sat herself down in a seat on Leon's right, eyeing the Spartan in her usual discerning way, her gaze going towards the crushed paper cup he was still holding in his left hand.

"You've done it again," she said matter-of-factly, grinning. Much of her right side had been scarred, but regenerative treatments had repaired much of the damage, leaving only some minor imperfections in the skin. It was her leg that had received the full brunt of the explosion and required even more repair.

Leon regarded the paper cup and the white powder within that had formerly been his tablets. He tilted it upside-down and let the powder spill out, leaving a neat white smudge on the carpet.

"Really, Lieutenant, I don't understand you," Valerie said, leaning back in her chair. "I mean, aren't you in constant pain? They messed around with your back quite a bit, from what I've heard."

"I'd rather deal with it myself, then let some chemical mixture do it," Leon said. There was a sharp stab of pain in his lower back as he said this and he squirmed in his chair noticeably.

"You're a strange man, Lieutenant," Valerie commented. She paused, deciding to change the subject. "So, have you had lunch yet?"

"No." Leon turned to look at her. She had started picking at her fingernails, presumably in an effort to scrape out whatever grit had gotten stuck beneath them.

"It's probably for the best," Valerie said, grinning again as she returned her gaze towards Leon. "Hospital food is..."

"Awful. Yes, I'm aware of that." Leon was not sure why Valerie sought him out to talk to. There were plenty of other people around who would be better suited for her, yet she had singled him out and seemed to be trying very hard to become friends with him. Leon had always lacked proper social skills, a result of being trained from such a young age to be a weapon. His training had not included such social skills, so there was always an awkward feeling he developed whenever someone tried to talk to him as a friend. He did not know quite what to do in situations like these, considering it best just to play along. Valerie seemed friendly enough, despite her eccentricities. He was aware of just how much trauma she had been through, perhaps even more than he had given the nature of her

injuries. Looking at her now, it would be hard to figure out that she had been practically mutilated in an explosion. Medical science had come a long way.

"They were serving turkey," Valerie continued. "It tasted more like cardboard. Though I've never been a fan of turkey. I prefer the meat of that other thing, that animal native to Arcadia...What was it called again?" She paused, trying to remember the name. Leon had no idea what animal she was talking about and so remained silent. Valerie frowned and shook her head, unable to recall the name in question.

"Whatever it's called, it's very good. It's like a cross between chicken and beef, but very tender..."

Leon was not particularly interested in learning about alien meats. He sat in silence, hoping Valerie would change the subject to something he actually cared about.

"And it goes well with onions..."

"Sergeant," Leon interrupted, narrowing his gaze at her.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"I don't care."

Valerie fell silent when he said this. Leon also kept quiet, shifting in his chair when another stab of pain shot up his spine.

"You sure you don't need those painkillers?" Valerie asked, noticing his discomfort.

"I'm sure." Leon put a hand to his lower back, around about where the beam rifle shot had struck him months ago. That wound would haunt him for the rest of his life and there was a chance, as the doctors had told him, that he would never properly recover. It was a thought he did not like to contemplate but could not ignore.

"Are all Spartans like this?" Valerie asked, genuinely curious.

"What do you mean?"

"Are you all so stubborn? There's nothing wrong with easing the pain. I'd do it."

"And that's your choice." Leon sighed, shifting his position so that he was slightly more upright. His right hand was shaking again, a side effect of all he had been through. It was not something he was very pleased with, taking it as another sign of weakness, the sort he did not need right now. If he was ever going to get out of this clinic he would need to pull himself together and a telltale shaking hand was a sure sign that he was falling apart. He stowed the hand down his side, hiding it from view between him and the arm of the sofa.

"I heard about what happened to you," Valerie said. "It's no wonder you're so pissed off with yourself."

"What do you know about that?" Leon asked, frowning.

"You botched a mission, almost got killed. And now you're punishing yourself for it."

"I'm not punishing myself. Besides, what do you care?"

Valerie's expression became somewhat more serious.

"I'm concerned."

"Why?"

"Because I'd say you're the only decent friend I've got here. I lost most of my squad, most of my friends. I was transferred to this hospital on short notice. You're the only person here I've spoken to that doesn't pretend to sympathize with me, tell me how sorry they are for what I've been through."

Leon was surprised to hear this, raising an eyebrow as he regarded Valerie with a bemused look.

"You're honest," Valerie added, giving a friendly smile. "That's what I like about you."

"Honesty? I wouldn't call it that." Leon shook his head. "I'm more of a realist. I'm also full of utter hatred of myself. I failed a mission, I almost died...Plenty of reason for disillusionment, don't you think?"

"You shouldn't feel so badly about yourself," Valerie said. "You're alive. That's what counts. You can walk, so you're not crippled either. Considering what you've been through, I'd say you deserve a rest. That includes taking those painkillers. You don't deserve to be in constant agony."

"It's not constant," Leon replied. "It comes and goes. I can live with it."

"Is this another Spartan thing?" Valerie sensed the doubt in Leon's voice. Even he sensed it. "Ignore the pain? What doesn't kill you makes you stronger? That sort of deal?"

Leon was silent for a moment. With his back throbbing painfully and his head full of conflicting thoughts, he took a while to answer.

"What does it matter to you, Sergeant?"

"How about you just call me Valerie?"

"I'll keep that in mind."

Valerie looked at him, regarding him with what he found to be a sympathetic gaze. She was certainly attractive, though it was not something he thought about often.

"You screwed up," Valerie said. "We all do. The point is, you've let it get to you. We all experience failures. The better thing is to learn from them and continue with life, rather than let them fuck us

over completely."

"I almost died," Leon countered. "It's hard to forget that."

"Maybe. But you're here now, and very much alive. You might try to stop being so bitter and just..." Valerie sighed. "I don't know, be more alive? Right now it's obvious just how much you're wallowing in your own misery. That's why taking the painkillers might be a good idea. It'll help you take your mind off of things."

"I don't want to take my mind off of things," Leon said. "I need to remember, I need to keep perfect clarity. I don't want any powerful drugs interfering with that."

"Whatever, Lieutenant," Valerie said, sounding resigned. "Do what you want. I'm just trying to help."

Leon did not need her help, or anyone else's for that matter. Valerie sounded a bit too much like the base's counsellor, something he found very unlikeable. Why she was so concerned with his wellbeing confused him a bit, though it probably had to do with how she saw him as a friend. Leon did feel some connection to her, but he was not sure just how strong it was, whether or not he could really consider her a "friend" in return. He did not know a whole lot about her, save for the obvious and how she had ended up in the hospital.

"Did you ever have family, Lieutenant?" Valerie asked, clearly interested.

"I had the other Spartans." Leon remembered the others all too well. To think he was one of the few left did anger him somewhat, but he had long since accepted the loss.

"It's peace-time now," Valerie said. "Perfect opportunity to settle down. Are you ever going to do that, Lieutenant?" She sounded distant, probably thinking of her own prospects for the future.

Leon had never thought much about his future outside of the military. There was still a lot to be done, least of all finding the stolen AI and the one who had almost killed him. It seemed unlikely that the peace would last, especially with the more recent events, including an incident over Earth that had left a few million people dead. He would always be needed as long as there were threats against humanity. There would continue to be such threats, given the vastness of the galaxy. The Sangheili were one he was very familiar with, their home-world and colonies divided as a result of the disbanding of the Covenant. There were plenty of loyalists out there intent on continuing the work of their Prophets. Leon would definitely be called in to help stop them.

"Peace never lasts," Leon said simply. Valerie said nothing in response to this. They both knew it was right, though as to how long the peace in question lasted was always dependent on circumstances.

"Truthfully," he added, causing Valerie to look his way again, "I don't think I can ever settle down."

"How old are you, Lieutenant?" Valerie asked. Leon gave her a funny look and she gave an innocent smile in reply. "I'm just curious. You

don't need to tell me if you don't want to."

"I'm thirty-six," Leon answered.

"And you've been fighting most of that time?"

"Yeah." It was normal to him, but not to Valerie. She was about the same age and had probably enlisted in her late teens, maybe her early twenties. She had had a childhood, something that Leon even knew he had missed out on. However, he had been very motivated to become a Spartan. His parents had been killed during the early Covenant incursions, leaving him orphaned and angry. Given the fact he had all the appropriate genetic traits to get into the Spartan program, the UNSC had not hesitated to put him into the training regimen. It had been hard, but he had pulled through. It was strange thinking back to those days, since nearly everyone he had trained with was dead. He was nothing more than a curiosity now, once part of a force meant to be expendable but somehow he had become the exact opposite. The UNSC actually wanted to keep him alive whenever possible, seeing just how useful someone with his abilities could be.

"It must have been tough," Valerie said.

"I made it, didn't I?" Leon asked. Valerie nodded in approval. Again, his back ached but he ignored it, instead focusing on the woman sitting next to him.

"And that's what counts. More now than ever."

Leon had to admit that she had a point. He had spent most of his time in hospital angry with himself and the rest of the galaxy in general. Still, that did not excuse his failure. For all intents and purposes, he should have been dead. Things might have been easier if that had happened.

"You know, something happened recently that really caught me off-guard," Valerie said.

"What happened?"

"I got paid a visit from some official," Valerie explained, a disbelieving look on her face. "He was from some upper echelon of the military, can't remember what branch exactly. Apparently, I've got what it takes to make a Spartan-IV. Caught me by surprise, but since my recovery's going so well someone took notice and flung the offer my way."

"Spartan-IV?" Leon had heard of the program, primarily because he had been offered to join it, as had all of the other surviving Spartans. He had not taken up the offer, having decided to stay in his current line of work. It was perhaps down to a sense of familiarity, that and joining another Spartan program seemed pointless. It would not be like it was when he was with the other Spartan-IIIs. He realized that maybe if he had taken up the offer, he would not have been sent on the mission that had ended with him crippled. There was no use thinking about that now, as it had happened in the past and could not be changed.

"Yeah. I'd get enhancements, fancy armour, all that stuff," Valerie said. "It's an enticing offer, but I'm going to have to get out of

this hospital first. That's going to take some time."

"So you're accepting the offer?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

Leon shrugged. He honestly did not know.

"I lost my squad and I almost lost my life," Valerie said. "I've got nothing left for me in the Marines. I'll be giving my career a healthy boost if I accept this offer. And the pay is apparently really good." She smiled as she said this. "Of course, money isn't why I got into this line of work."

"Why did you join up?"

"My father was a marine," Valerie explained. "And his father before him. My father had wanted a son, but he got me instead, along with two other daughters. He taught me how to shoot, how to hunt, persuaded me to join up. I didn't need much persuading, though."

Leon nodded, thinking he may very well be getting a better understanding of who Valerie was. Raised in a military household, most likely with strict parents, with a father who had instilled some sense of duty into her. With the war going on at the time, there would have been even more reason for her to join up.

Valerie was about to open her mouth again, but she fell silent as her gaze went towards someone who had been walking their way. Leon followed her gaze towards the newcomer: Commander Elise McGillon, outfitted in her grey Navy uniform with her light brown hair tied back in a neat ponytail. She regarded the pair with a friendly gaze, her green eyes flitting back and forth between Leon and Valerie.

"Am I interrupting anything?" She asked.

"No, Commander," Leon said.

Valerie frowned and looked up at the Commander, a smirk at her lips.

"I was just talking to the Lieutenant," Valerie said. "He's been refusing to take his medication."

"The doctors told me about that," Elise said. She returned her gaze to Leon, giving a look that made it seem that she was trying to figure him out. "Say, Lieutenant, can you stand up for me?"

Leon was about to ask why, but changed his mind, thinking it better if he just followed the order. Slowly rising out of the chair, he stood up, his back aching as he straightened himself into a sensible posture, releasing his grip on the arms of the chair. He wobbled a bit, unable to quite keep his balance. His right hand was shaking, as were his legs. As much as he hated to admit it, but he had some difficulty keeping himself upright.

"You don't look too good," Elise commented, regarding the Spartan. He was a head taller than her, but his unsteadiness was blatantly obvious to anyone watching him. "Maybe you should take your

medication. It'll help with the pain."

"I'm fine, Commander," Leon said. For a while, he had been upset with Elise. She had been the one in charge of the mission to New Sanctuary and she had sent him in without the appropriate intel on the situation. It had only been a fleeting feeling of anger that had subsided the more he had realized how little control Elise had actually had over the mission. She had been taking orders from the top, orders that had prevented her from giving Leon the full details. If anything, she had been stuck in the middle and had received much of the fallout from the failed mission. Where Leon had almost died, Commander McGillon had almost lost her career.

She was fairly good looking, very authoritative in her stance and quite tall for a non-augmented female. She was a few inches taller than Valerie, her skin pale and her face carrying delicate-looking feminine curves but the fiery look in her eyes gave away her stricter, more determined nature. Around the base she had a reputation for being tough on her subordinates, working them hard and expecting nothing but their best. As for her relationship with Leon, they were nothing more than professional, not even going as far to be "friends". Usually Elise was nothing more than the voice in his helmet radio telling him what to do. Seeing her in person was always a bit of a novelty.

"What's this about, Commander?" Leon asked. He did his best to remain standing, despite the pain forming at his lower back.

"It's not exactly something I can discuss here," Elise answered.

"You're going to put him on another secret mission?" Valerie said, getting the Commander's attention. "The last time you did that he almost died."

Elise frowned, realizing the implication.

"You're out of line, Sergeant," she said, her tone stern. Valerie shook her head with disdain but said nothing.

Leon almost stumbled then but managed to quickly guide himself so that he fell back into his chair, his back throbbing painfully. Elise looked concerned, doubting Leon was in a state for any new mission. The doctors here had told her that the Spartan was in reasonable condition, but that his mental state was in question. He had been through a lot and very likely had a healthy dose of post-traumatic stress disorder. Elise was already considering going back to the General and telling him to leave Leon out of action for another few months, but she still felt that he might be useful.

"Can you walk?" Elise asked.

"How do you think I got into this chair?" Leon countered, unable to help but get defensive. He pointed towards the doors ahead that opened onto a lengthy corridor. "My room's down there. It's a considerable distance."

There was a short silence, neither of them sure of what to say. Valerie stood up and looked back at Leon, giving another one of her friendly smiles.

"I think I'll leave you two alone," she said. "Nice talking with you, Leon." She turned around and walked away, heading out of the recreation room, though she did manage one last unfriendly glance at Elise who failed to notice it, her attention instead focused on the Spartan.

"You don't know how much it pisses me off seeing you like this," Elise said abruptly. "I should have known better than to send you on that mission alone..."

"You had your orders, I had mine," Leon said dismissively. He felt no ill will towards her. "Besides, I can walk. I know you don't think I'm up to it, but I can walk, even jog."

"But are you up to your former standards?" Elise asked. "Before your..." She trailed off, trying to think of an appropriate way of describing it. "Before your \_injuries\_, you were in peak physical condition."

"I've been exercising regularly while I've been here," Leon said. "Obviously, the first few weeks when I was stuck in bed, I couldn't do much. But they have fitness facilities here. Even if my legs aren't as good as they used to, I've been making sure to keep my upper body in shape. I'm sure I can still outdo any of the marines on this base in a fight."

"That may be so, but it's not me you've got to convince."

"Oh? And who do I have to prove this to?" Leon was genuinely curious now. Elise would not have visited him unless it was important. She was not the type to pay a 'friendly' visit. They were not even good friends, just well-acquainted.

"General Caine," Elise replied. "That's why I'm here. He suggested I find out if you're up to getting back in action. To be honest, I have my doubts."

>Leon swallowed. Of course she had her doubts. Even he himself had doubts. It was hard enough to run and he tried to imagine himself getting into a combat situation. Doing so just made his right hand shake again.<p>

"You didn't come here to do just that, Commander," Leon said, reading a bit more from Elise's expression.

"Alright. I personally wanted to see how you were going." She smiled. "Now that you have the truth, maybe you could stand up again and take another walk?"

Leon nodded. He rose to his feet once more, wobbled for a bit and gritted his teeth against the pain in his lower back. Slowly, he took a step forwards, followed by another, gradually building into a rhythm as he walked by Elise and towards the corridor. He paused, stumbling momentarily before quickly resetting his balance. Elise watched as he made it to the double doors that lead into the corridor, steadyng himself against the doorway before turning around. He looked to be in pain but seemed to be handling it very well, probably a result of all that intense Spartan training.

"Can you follow me to the General's office?" Elise asked.

Leon nodded. He was fairly confident he could do just that, despite the ache in his back and the unsteadiness in his legs. Elise still had a doubtful look on her face but nonetheless started out of the room, with Leon slowly following.

"You said it pissed you off to see me this way," Leon said, as they entered the front reception.

"I know we had our orders, but I knew it was a bad idea to send you in there without the full details," Elise said, stopping where she was before turning around to face the Spartan. "And what's even more frustrating is that we're still not sure who's responsible for the whole thing. The people who took the AI still elude us."

"All the more reason to work towards tracking them down," Leon said. He would very much like to get his hands on the Skirmisher who had put him in his current state. "They have one of our AIs..."

"And they haven't done a thing with it," Elise interrupted. "Nothing we know about, anyway. It's likely they just gave up on trying to crack its security protocols."

"You really believe that?"

She shrugged. There was no evidence to indicate that the terrorists had done anything with the AI, nor was there evidence to suggest that they had not. It simply cast further concern in Leon's mind that these alien terrorists could be planning something, but without any substantial information on the situation there was little that could be done.

"I really don't know what to think," Elise said. "The theft of an AI is serious. The fact that we haven't heard anything about it since it was stolen does worry me. But that's all we can do. Worry and hope nothing happens." She paused, eyeing Leon with a careful gaze. "Are you absolutely sure you're up for a walk?"

Leon nodded in the affirmative. He was in a substantial amount of pain, though it tended to come and go, differing in its severity each time it returned. Right now it was at its moderate level, tolerable for a Spartan but enough to impair his movement. Even so, he insisted on following Elise to the General's office. If he needed to prove to the General that he was fit enough for duty, then that was exactly what he would do.

"Lead the way," he said, using one arm to gesture towards the main entrance.

## 6. Old Acquaintances

\*\*Old Acquaintances\*\*

January 15th, 2558

The Covenant-built cruiser Relinquished Light had been within slip-space for a few days now, gradually working its way towards its eventual destination. Life on board such a vessel, in this time of "peace", was fairly routine. Training drills happened regularly while

the ship's systems were maintained by the tentacle-wielding Huragok. Much of the crew was Sangheili, as the vessel was one of many taken by the species at the end of the war and refitted for their exclusive needs. There were still a number of Kig-Yar on board, as well as a unit of Unggoy who tended to keep to themselves. It was likely those Unggoy would be used as fodder on any ground mission, sent in first to soften up the enemy before the Sangheili soldiers marched in.

The interior consisted of mostly purple and blue metal, with sleek curves and holographic terminals placed at intervals. The lighting was relatively muted within the ship, much of it coming from lights embedded in the walls and ceilings. The cruiser itself was very large, totalling at about three thousand metres in length and one and a half in width. It was easy to get lost within the maze-like corridors, particularly for those who were new aboard, though the computer terminals that were spaced upon the walls could provide maps at the push of a button. The main problem Kal'Shayar had with the place was the colour scheme and lack of any decent lighting.

He had been on Covenant ships plenty of times before, but they were all the same inside. The design aesthetic was influenced heavily by the Prophets, with attempted amalgamations from the aesthetics of the multiple Covenant species. There were some exclusive areas for particular species, but on this cruiser those areas had been refurbished by the new Sangheili owners. Kal'Shayar had been given a modestly sized set of living quarters that had been quite obviously intended for a Sangheili, complete with a bed considerably larger than him and cabinets designed to contain Sangheili armour.

Nonetheless, Kal'Shayar had done his best to settle in. Soon enough they would arrive at some human world and then his work would begin in proper. Until then, he just had to put up with being on a cruiser filled with Sangheili, many of which were still under the belief that their race was very much superior to all of the others. It was a trait leftover from the war, when the Sangheili had been held in high regard by the Prophets (at least until the Jiralhanae had taken their place). They had once had all of the official duties, even serving as bodyguards for the Prophets before they had been usurped. From what Kal'Shayar knew of their home-world, they were a very honour-driven people, far more warrior-like than the Kig-Yar.

The Covenant had been what had kept their people united. With that gone, Sangheili worlds had fallen into disarray, with multiple factions vying for control. It contrasted to the Kig-Yar, Kal'Shayar had found, with his species shaking off Covenant influence relatively easily when the war had ended. It had probably been for the best, if what was happening with the Sangheili was anything to go by.

Kal'Shayar had spent the last few days on board keeping to himself. He surmised that he was the only Skirmisher on the ship, though there were several regular Kig-Yar he had encountered. There had been one in particular, Javal, who seemed to be in charge of the group and had been very condescending towards Kal'Shayar during their first encounter the day before. Javal had apparently read about Kal'Shayar in computer records and considered the Skirmisher nothing but a wash-out, past his prime and in no state to be part of a new taskforce. Javal and his small squad were to serve as the Kig-Yar detachment for the operation, a fact that had left Kal'Shayar doubting why he was even being brought along. It was a matter he had considered taking up with Major Jerashar, but he was yet to find a

suitable opportunity to do so.

Rising out of bed for the day, Kal'Shayar made his way to where he had placed the metal chest containing the few belongings he had brought with him. This included his set of orange combat armour, something he had not worn for several years. He had kept it stored away in his home on Sauem, thinking he would never need to put it on again. Clearly, he had been mistaken and today seemed as good a time as any to try out his old armour. Flipping open the latches on the chest, he pushed up the lid and began to remove the armour suit contained within. It came complete with a padded under-suit that would fit tightly to the wearer's frame, the armour itself being placed upon it.

Kal'Shayar took his time, sliding into the under-suit, finding that it fit rather tightly around the waist and stomach area, as if he had gained weight. Some parts felt slightly looser than they had once been, indicating that his muscular frame had actually lost some of that muscle. A life of staying at home, living comfortably if only to look after his ill daughter had seen some of his former physical strength leave him. He had taken care to remain fit as best he could, but a few daily bouts of exercise were easily interrupted by other, more pressing matters such as the wellbeing of his daughter. With her gone, he would be able to work back to the peak physical condition he had once had.

He slipped on the rest of the armour, save the helmet which was not currently necessary. He then bent down and removed the holographic emitter that had been buried under the armour. It was a small device, square-shaped and flat with a silver hue. Pressing a button replayed one of several recordings of him and his daughter, some going as far back as when his mate had still been alive and his son a part of the family. Looking at them now, they stirred up memories he had all but forgotten. Rather than let himself get distracted, he switched off the emitter and placed it back into the chest. There would be time to reminisce later, though that was something he thought he had done enough of. Dwelling on the past only brought him pain and it would only be a distraction from the mission he was on. It thought that it may have been best to simply leave the emitter alone and put that life behind him, for now anyway.

He regarded his appearance in the mirror nearby, running a hand through the black plumage on his head. Seeing himself in the armour was bringing back memories of the war. He had killed and almost been killed while wearing this very suit of armour on many occasions. It had been one of his responsibilities to keep it maintained, but there were still dents and scratches as well as scorch marks from past battles on some of the armour plating. As for the portable shield generators at his wrists, they had stopped functioning years before. If they were functioning, they would have provided a small oval-shaped shield that would deflect enemy fire. How successful they were at doing this depended on his reflexes, and with all Skirmishers those reflexes were lightning fast. He wondered if they were still up to scratch for him, thinking he might do well to test them out in one of the training rooms later.

Walking over to the chest, his booted feet clacking upon the metal floor, he found a decade old "needle rifle" at the bottom. It was covered with a layer of dust, one that Kal'Shayar took the time to wipe away using a piece of cloth he found in the chest with it.

Regarding the rifle, feeling its weight in his hands, he was reminded of the many times he had wielded the weapon in battle. It was a model that was no longer being manufactured, causing these "needle rifles" to be a collector's item of sorts. They fired pink crystalline shards at high velocity, with each shard exploding shortly after contact with a surface. Grouping them together could result in a powerful explosion. It was a shame then, as he had no ammunition for the weapon.

Placing it back into the chest, he regarded the contents with a thoughtful gaze before closing the lid. Turning around, he made his way out of the room, entering the long corridor outside. It was about time he had something to eat, though the food here was not very good. Much of it consisted of nutrient "paste" that was nothing more than tasteless slop dispensed into a bowl, slop he would then have to shovel down his throat. It was no surprise that the higher ranked officers on board, especially the Sangheili ones, received far better food.

The nearest mess hall, according to the map of the ship Kal'Shayar had examined the day before, was within this particular wing. Following the corridor, he passed by a few Sangheili officers, none of which paid him much attention. He found his way to the mess hall after a few minutes, noticing that it was very much empty save for a group of Kig-Yar he recognized.

Javal was sitting at a table at the end of the room with his squad. There were seven of them in total, five male and two female. Javal looked to be of a mixed breed, carrying the thick plumage of a Skirmisher but the more agile frame of a common Kig-Yar. The others were all commoners, the males carrying slightly more muscle on their frames than the two females. The group was talking rather loudly in their native language but the emptiness of the hall ensured that such loud conversation did not annoy anyone else.

Kal'Shayar would have liked to avoid the group but noticed that the food dispensers were on the wall near the table. His plan to avoid them thwarted, he walked over, heading past the table and immediately catching the attention of Javal. He ignored the group as best he could, preferring to focus on getting food.

"Kal'Shayar," Javal said, with the Skirmisher in question ignoring him. Javal raised his voice slightly, saying the name again: "Kal'Shayar."

Turning around, Kal'Shayar eyed the hybrid wearily.

"What is it?"

"I was curious," Javal replied, the others around him having fallen silent. "Have they reinstated your rank yet? I believe you were a 'Champion', among other titles."

"No, they have not," Kal'Shayar said. He noticed that the other Kig-Yar at the table were all watching him. He did see that the hackles on one of the females were raised in a telltale sign of sexual attraction. This was one thing he was not terribly interested in at the moment, especially as he was still mourning the loss of his daughter. The female in question was of a typically athletic-build for a soldier, with a column of very colourful quills running down

the back of her head.

"So, technically you are not even a soldier," Javal said. He gave the Kig-Yar equivalent of a smile. "I wonder why they even bothered to bring you along. You have not been in combat for several years. Why were you chosen for this mission?"

It was not difficult for Kal'Shayar to detect the hostility in Javal's voice. It seemed the young half-Skirmisher had something against him, though Kal'Shayar was at a loss as to what this was.

"You might want to ask Major Jerashar about that," Kal'Shayar said. "As for another matter, I cannot help but feel some hostility coming from you. Do you disapprove of me being here?"

"I disapprove of a clearly incapable soldier being here," Javal countered. "And I also disapprove of your kind in general. Skirmishers have always seen themselves above the common Kig-Yar..."

"From what I can see, you carry Skirmisher blood."

"My father was like you," Javal said, rising out of his seat, some visible annoyance on his face. "I was nothing but an accident, along with my sister. He hated us both, abused us and my mother...You look like him."

"I am not him," Kal'Shayar said sternly. "And I do not abuse younglings. You may wish to put your prejudices aside, when out on an important mission. It is very likely that we will work together..."

"I have read your record," Javal interrupted. "You may have been a hero on more than one occasion, but you are out of your element here. I was promised to be in command of this Kig-Yar detachment, but clearly you will usurp that command."

"Is that what this is about?" Kal'Shayar could understand why Javal was so hostile to him now, not just because of some hatred for an abusive Skirmisher father but of the obvious interference Kal'Shayar's arrival had caused. "I am not certain of the role I will be given here, but if it is in command of the Kig-Yar detachment then it is your duty to fall in line and obey that decision."

"None of us want to be lead by you," Javal said. Some of the others nodded in agreement, but a few, including the female who was clearly attracted to him, did not seem so enthusiastic in their agreement. "The records on the computer said you were emotionally unstable. This much I can tell just by looking at you. The fact that you have been out of the service for several years..."

"Perhaps you could show me what you mean?" Kal'Shayar knew Javal would not hesitate when given the challenge. Javal actually reminded Kal'Shayar of a younger version of himself, in a way. The younger Skirmisher was somewhat more obnoxious, though.

"Is that a challenge, Kal'Shayar?" Javal was smiling again. He walked over to where Kal'Shayar stood, looking the Skirmisher up and down. They were about the same height, though Javal had a leaner build, a

result of his common Kig-Yar half. The other Kig-Yar at the table were watching with interest while Kal'Shayar regarded his new opponent carefully. It was clear that Javal had been trained much in the same way Kal'Shayar had, although his common Kig-Yar half would leave him with the weaker bone that sub-species had. A full-blooded Skirmisher such as Kal'Shayar had stronger bones and a great deal more flexibility.

"You might be referring to me as 'Commander', soon enough," Kal'Shayar said, half-jokingly. Javal seemed to take offence to this, throwing a punch that the Skirmisher quickly dodged, leaning away from it before delivering his own blow, bringing a fist into Javal's gut and making him stumble momentarily.

This caused Javal to emit an angered snarl and he lunged, slamming into Kal'Shayar and almost knocking him over. Kal'Shayar grabbed Javal's arms and threw him off of him, with Javal coming to a stop a few steps away, uttering one of the stronger swear words in the Kig-Yar tongue.

Kal'Shayar could very easily have jumped well away from Javal, using his superior Skirmisher agility but that would tantamount to retreating from a fight and he did not wish to give the younger Kig-Yar the satisfaction. Instead, he avoided Javal's next strike, taking advantage of the younger's overbalancing by grabbing him by the arm and flipping him forwards, causing him to land on the floor with a loud thump!

It all came very naturally to Kal'Shayar, who had been doubting his combat ability as he had not engaged in a fight for several years. Clearly, one did not so easily forget what their training and experience had taught them. As for Javal, who had never seen a proper fight outside of training, he had an angered expression on his face, plumage raised. It gave the impression that he was slightly bigger than he actually was, a leftover from their evolution as a species, where the raising of one's feathers was an act of defence against predators in an attempt to frighten them off. Now it was an act of simple intimidation and a side effect of rage.

Kal'Shayar extended a hand and Javal took it reluctantly, but rather than allow his elder to help him up, Javal seized the opportunity to throw Kal'Shayar to the floor. It caught the Skirmisher off-guard, leaving him stunned for a moment while Javal jumped back onto his feet, preparing to deliver another blow against his opponent.

However, before he could, a deep voice sounded out from somewhere nearby. Javal froze in place upon hearing it while Kal'Shayar managed a glance towards its source.

"I never thought you Kig-Yar could provide such entertainment," the Sangheili said, stepping towards the pair. He was over eight feet tall and very muscular, wearing dark purple armour and a helmet that covered much of his face. "In fact, I always thought your species was worthless, save for being used as shields in combat." He leaned down and grabbed Kal'Shayar by one arm, easily lifting him up and onto his feet. Letting go, he then eyed Javal carefully with shining blue eyes, a look of contempt appearing on his face.

"You would do well to avoid engaging Kal'Shayar in a fight," the

Field Marshall said. "He is a far better fighter than you are."

Javal's face contorted into one of anger but he said nothing, preferring to not talk-back to the high-ranking Sangheili standing in front of him. Rather, he kept silent and returned to his spot at the table. The other Kig-Yar were also silent, the arrival of the Field Marshall killing whatever good mood they had been in.

Kal'Shayar looked at the Sangheili, feeling slightly intimidated by the officer's large size. It was a feeling he quickly quelled and instead stood up straight, giving a respectful salute.

"You must be Field Marshall Rel Valum," Kal'Shayar said.

"You are correct." The Field Marshall regarded Kal'Shayar with a stone cold gaze. "I came here to see you, Kal'Shayar. I wish to invite you to my private table in order to discuss the current operation. It would give us adequate privacy and it would also allow us to become better acquainted."

Kal'Shayar nodded. He had nothing better to do and eating with the Sangheili officers on board was certainly more appealing than eating with a bunch of obnoxious Kig-Yar.

"Very good. You will follow." Rel turned around and started walking for the mess hall's exit, with Kal'Shayar following a few steps behind. They made their way out into one of the corridors, passing a few Sangheili soldiers who stood to attention as soon as they saw the Field Marshall coming. They would quickly relax once he had walked past, some even looking relieved.

"What was your quarrel with Major Javal?" Rel asked as they walked along.

"He was concerned that I would be taking over his command," Kal'Shayar explained. "He did not wish to fall under my command, deeming me as 'out of my element'."

>Rel gave the Sangheili equivalent of a smile, opening up his lower mandibles.<p>

"From what I have read about you, Kal'Shayar, it is unlikely that you are 'out of your element', as that foolish youngster told you," he said. "I never thought much of your species as a whole. You lacked a certain drive, and you lacked the physical prowess to fight well in a way. At least, that is what I thought of your common Kig-Yar brothers and sisters. As for your 'Skirmisher' sub-species..." He trailed off, managing a glance back at Kal'Shayar. "You have your uses."

Kal'Shayar supposed that this was Rel Valum's form of a compliment and took it as such.

"It was a shame to see your kind nearly wiped out by the end of the war," Rel continued. They rounded a corner, passing through a security checkpoint that scanned them as they went by. Coming to a door, Rel waved his hand in front of a scanner plate to its left, causing the door to slide open. Behind it was the officer's dining area, though the large twelve-seat table was empty save for one seat containing a familiar figure: Jerashar Wittron. He was seated at a

chair to the right of one end of the table, with Rel making his way to his spot at the head.

"We had to resort to using the Yanmae, as they had similar abilities to your kind," Rel said, as he pulled out his chair and sat down. Kal'Shayar sat across from Jerashar, making eye contact with the Major who gave a curt nod.

"Personally, I despised the creatures." Rel tapped at a holographic panel that was projected on his part of the table, calling another Sangheili over. This one was dressed in a set of grey robes that carried the insignia of the Sangheili independent military, as it was now free from Covenant rule. The Sangheili was noticeably leaner in build and a bit shorter than Rel, the skin tone lighter. It took Kal'Shayar a moment to realize that he was looking at one of their females.

"Prepare a meal for our guest," Rel told the female. "Make sure it is a meal worthy of a Kig-Yar soldier."

The female nodded and left the room, heading off to carry out this task. Rel returned his gaze to Kal'Shayar, who was struck with uncertainty as to why a Sangheili female was on board. From what he knew, the females of that species tended to stay on their home-world (and its colonies), raising the children but being well-versed in combat in order to serve as a formidable defence force if their worlds ever came under direct attack.

"You are wondering why a woman is on board?" Rel asked.

"Yes," Kal'Shayar said.

"She is a friend," Rel said carefully. Kal'Shayar could already tell that the Field Master was hiding most of the truth, but he decided against prying. "I chose her personally for her skills, not only in the art of combat, but for her abilities to prepare some remarkable meals. Her name is Vavera."

"I thought your females stayed on your home-world?" Kal'Shayar asked, curious.

"There have been a number of exceptions, especially since the end of the war," Rel answered. "Our numbers are not like they used to be and as we ensure our females are as well-trained as our males, they make for excellent reserve soldiers."

There was a pause. Rel looked at Jerashar, who was picking at a plate of some kind of meat, and then back to Kal'Shayar.

"The Major has told me much about you," Rel said. "He said you had even saved his life once."

"Maybe more than once," Kal'Shayar added with a smirk. "But, he saved mine just as often."

"I take it you have not been properly told of your mission?" Rel asked. "The nature of it is very clandestine, especially for the humans, who are under the impression that it effects them the most. They have an odd tendency to assume that the galaxy revolves around them."

"I am aware of the general mission directive," Kal'Shayar said. At that moment, the female Sangheili, Vavera, returned with Kal'Shayar's meal. It was a traditional Kig-Yar dish, a mix of meat and vegetables that were native to his species home-world. It was definitely better than the nutrient paste that he had expected to receive on the ship, so he immediately dug in. Cutlery was not something Kig-Yar believed in as their fingers were more than adequate.

"There are insurgents, some kind of movement," Kal'Shayar said, between bites. "They threaten to upset the peace."

"It is what they acquired some time ago that concerns us the most," Jerashar said, breaking his silence. "These terrorists acquired a human military artificial intelligence, something that they could use to wreak much havoc. That is why the humans have called on us for assistance, as this artificial intelligence was stolen by a Kig-Yar and Sangheili force. The humans will have the exact details as to our mission when we arrive at our destination, but judging from their reports the situation is serious."

Kal'Shayar was not too familiar with this idea of "artificial intelligence", save for the fact that they were often used to run ships and were a whole lot smarter than any organic being. If one had been stolen then he supposed it was bad news

"I do not trust the humans," Rel said. "I never have and I never will. However, we have been chosen to assist and we will do just that. It has been considered an opportunity for an important cultural exchange, an attempt to improve relations between our races. Personally, I think we should let the humans combat their own problems than get involved."

"Why did you choose me?" Kal'Shayar asked.

There was a pause, with Rel and Jerashar exchanging a mostly unreadable glance.

"It was a suggestion from the Major," Rel said. "We need an experienced Kig-Yar and, as the Major could personally vouch for you and your lack of involvement with any terrorist organization, you made for a logical choice. But, I think we have spoken of business for quite enough. Enjoy your food, Kal'Shayar."

The Skirmisher simply nodded, surprised at how good his food was. The meat had actual flavour to it, so it was not simply a synthesized replacement. Getting it on board must have taken some doing.

"I have received notification that your planet's government is willing to reinstate your old rank," Jerashar said, pulling out a data-pad and sliding it across the table towards Kal'Shayar. He took it up with one hand, examining what was displayed carefully. It was some sort of official report, bearing the insignia of the Sauem governing body that they had reinstated Kal'Shayar to his rank of "Commander", secondary title "Champion". He had never expected to get back into the military quite like this, having assumed he would end up living his life as a shut-in. He had had no more family and had no interest to return to the service. That had changed and this had surprised him, but maybe his old friend Deval had been right: getting a mission like this would help take his mind off of all that had

happened, give him something to focus on and hopefully amount to something once again.

"This could not have come at a better time," Kal'Shayar said as he finished off the meat on his plate. "I feel that being part of this operation might give me some sense of purpose. I lost all that when my daughter died, but now..." He paused for a moment, considering what to add. "Now it feels like I can do some good again."

"You fought in the war," Rel said, frowning. "Was that not 'good' in itself?"

"We fought in a war that should never have happened," Kal'Shayar replied, narrowing his gaze towards the Field Marshall. "We almost wiped out an entire species because of the lies the Prophets told us."

"They were not all lies." Rel sounded annoyed and Kal'Shayar figured that this Sangheili was one of the more traditionalist ones, still trying to cling onto the old ways despite the changes happening around him. "Mark my words, Kal'Shayar. The humans are dangerous. Already they take our technology and that of the Forerunners to enhance their ships, giving themselves an advantage over us."

"Are we not doing the same?"

"The technology of the Forerunners is still sacred to many," Jerashar interjected. "To attempt to reverse-engineer it would be considered heresy, as strange as that sounds now."

"Perhaps for you Sangheili," Kal'Shayar said. Of all the former Covenant races, it was unsurprising that the Sangheili were the ones getting hung up on old traditions. "But for the Kig-Yar...We will do whatever we need to do to maintain an advantage. We are free to do what we will, with the Covenant no longer a factor. I believe that being rid of that old system is a change for the better."

"As do I," Jerashar said. Rel did not look too enthused, glancing at Vavera who stood nearby. She clicked her lower mandibles, an equivalent of a shrug before she turned around and departed the room again.

"What is the good of peace," Rel began, "When it only leads to more conflict? Instead of two sides in a war as we had before, now we have no war but multiple sides, many fighting over similar objectives. These terrorists are but one side in a battle, hoping to upset the balance. The humans are another and the Sangheili..." He paused, trying to think of a good way of describing the current state of his species. "The Sangheili represent far more than one side. Our species is divided. Even on this very ship I have soldiers entering into altercations with one another if they come from rival families. It is an unfortunate affair."

"Maybe we have some insight into what these terrorists are planning," Jerashar added. Kal'Shayar was not too fond of politics and the family politics of the Sangheili did not interest him very much at all. Even so, he knew that something like that could have lasting repercussions on all of them. If one particular group on the Sangheili home-world was victorious, then the rest of their species would have to fall in line with their ideals. If those ideals

involved going to war with another species then there really would be a galactic crisis.

"The balance of power is evenly spread," Jerashar said. "The humans may have an advantage in some areas, but not in others. If these terrorists were to upset this balance, we could have another war."

"Why would they wish to start another war?" Kal'Shayar asked. "There has to be something more to it than simply trying to upset the peace."

"As I said," Rel interrupted, taking on a more passionate tone. "What good is peace if it leads to more conflict? Things were a lot simpler before we had it. Another war might be good for us, unite us again if there were a common foe to fight."

"And what of the other species?" Kal'Shayar asked. Rel was definitely one of the more traditionalist war-minded military leaders. Men like him were often at a loss on what to do during peace-time. Kal'Shayar had felt lost in much the same way, but hoping for another war was not something he had been doing.

"The strongest will survive," Rel said. "As for the others..." He thumped a fist onto the table. "They will be crushed. Simple as that."

Kal'Shayar said nothing. He exchanged glances with Jerashar, who looked somewhat uneasy but also remained silent. If anything, Kal'Shayar was hoping his involvement in this operation would prevent another war, not start one.

## 7. Tests

\*\*Tests\*\*

January 15th, 2558

It was mid-afternoon and the base at Pike's Creek was fairly active. Leon had changed out of his hospital garb and into a proper uniform, finding some relief in the fact that the pain in his back had eased somewhat. He made his way to the main administration building, finding that the receptionist there was expecting him. She sent him straight through to General Caine's office, so Leon was spared a wait.

He was only vaguely familiar with Caine and had heard a little about him. Caine was apparently a fairly well-regarded General, a stand-out officer in the Army who had been put in charge of the entire base (and the settlement it was in, to an extent). From what Leon had heard, the General also had himself a Spartan as some kind of personal guard, though this was nothing but a rumour and the Spartan in question was one of the instructors here. Leon had seen her around a few times in the past but they had never really interacted, for whatever reason. He always got the impression that she was not interested in talking with him and Leon had no desire to try and make friends. Both of them had been through a lot and had their own concerns.

He still had some difficulty keeping on his own two feet, but he did his best to stand up straight and appear strong. It was not befitting of a Spartan to be stumbling around like some invalid old man. He was constantly reminded of what had happened to him on New Sanctuary, how a routine operation had turned into something far worse and almost killed him. The prospect of getting back into action, as Commander McGillon had so eloquently put it, was definitely enticing as it would at least bring some purpose back into his existence. Being forced to hang around a hospital was not his idea of a life and he would have preferred to be out there, fighting whatever foe needed to be fought.

General Nathaniel Caine was seated at his desk, mulling over some reports on a data-pad when Leon walked in. He looked up and put aside the data-pad before gesturing towards a vacant seat across his desk.

"Sit down, Lieutenant," Caine said. "Good to see you up and about. The doctors were telling me how they thought it would take a lot longer for you to be able to stand properly."

Leon sat down in the chair, regarding the General. He had greying close-cropped hair and was dressed in a green Army General's uniform. The Army usually got a bad rap from the other branches of the military, considered to be the "lowest" out of them all. Of course, this was merely common misconception and not quite true, as there were just as many distinguished individuals in the Army as there were in every other branch. Caine was certainly one of them, having made his way to the top (or just below it, since he still took orders from others higher than him) and was now taking in the rewards for it. That included money and influence, two things that were made quite obvious from the decorations in his office.

It was lavishly decorated, with glass cabinets filled with small trophies and cases containing medals. He had many coloured ribbons pinned to his jacket, each one representing some kind of commendation he had received. He had a cigar sitting in a glass ashtray on his desk, its tip thoroughly burnt with a thin trail of smoking waft from it. The window behind the desk had its blinds mostly closed, but this still allowed for some light to stream in. The desk was very tidy, lacking any sort of clutter. Caine was a perfectionist in this regard, preferring a tidy working space than leaving whatever he needed lying around in easy reach, as that would only lead to a disorganized mess.

"Would you like a drink?" Caine asked. He opened a drawer at his desk as he said this and pulled from it a glass bottle of fairly expensive scotch. From the same drawer he drew two glasses, but put one away when Leon shook his head.

"I don't drink much myself," Caine continued. "Usually just the one glass per day, just as a little treat." He poured himself a glass of the brownish liquid before placing the cap back on the bottle and stowing it into its drawer.

"You wanted to see me, General?" Leon asked.

Caine nodded. He took a sip from the glass before putting it down again. He seemed friendly enough, Leon surmised, and was probably bored of sitting in this office most of the time. A desk position, to

some in the military, was often considered a safe but certainly uninteresting career. Caine had been out in the field most of his working life, fighting whoever needed to be fought and as dangerous as it was it seemed to be the more thrilling line of work. He had left field work behind him, in most regards, and enjoyed what was essentially a retirement position. Leon could tell he was bored just by looking at him, as if his visit was one of the more interesting things that had happened to him today.

"How's your back?" Caine asked.

The pain was still there, though not as bad as it had been earlier. Leon shifted in his seat, his legs also sore. His doctors had been worried he would push himself too hard too soon, but doing just that had ensured he would be able to walk to a decent extent far sooner than anticipated. It had also made the pain worse.

"Not too bad, I hope?" Caine added, before Leon could answer. "It's amazing what medical technology can do these days. They rebuilt the damaged nerves, completely regenerated them. It's quite extraordinary." He paused, regarding Leon with a careful gaze. "I also heard that you've given the resident counsellor some concern. He told me that he believed you were 'depressed', a result of blaming yourself for the failure of the mission to New Sanctuary and a direct consequence of the crippling wounds you received. Is this true?"

Leon was silent for a moment. It was certainly true, but not something he easily admitted. There had been many factors at play during that mission and it seemed stupid blaming himself for all of them, but nonetheless he did even if much of what had happened had been out of his control. That was one thing that frustrated him the most: all those uncontrollable variables. How had they been supposed to know that some alien terrorists would use the opportunity to steal an AI and leave him near death?

"I'll take your silence as a 'yes'," Caine said. "It's nothing to be ashamed of, really. The point is, you're alive and you can walk. That's why I called you here today: I want to put you back onto active duty. The only problem is, I need to be certain if you can handle that."

"I can handle it, sir," Leon said.

"Nice to hear that you're eager to prove it." Caine took another sip from his glass of scotch, thinking for a moment. "As for the reality of it, I need proper proof. I can't just put you back onto active service by going on your word. You need to be tested. Little things, such as fitness and overall physical health. That way I can have this proof down in a solid form I can send off to High Command so they can approve of my decision."

"Test?" Leon found the idea rather unappealing. Whatever 'tests' Caine had in mind, it was unlikely they would be challenging for a Spartan. It seemed like a waste of time, but unfortunately Caine was the one in charge here, not Leon. And it seemed certain that the Spartan would have to adhere to taking these tests, as pointless as he thought it would be.

"Yes. I've already scheduled them for tomorrow. I'm sure you'll get

through them fine."

There was a pause. Caine noticed Leon's disapproving gaze and clenched his mouth to one side in a sort of facial "shrug".

"They shouldn't be no trouble for a Spartan," Caine said. "Especially one with your record."

"For all this time, I still haven't been told the whole story about New Sanctuary," Leon said, changing the subject. Since he was here with the General, he may as well try to get some answers. The mission had been sketchy to start with, thinking about it now just made it seem all the more inconsistent. Even during the mission he had found it frustrating that important intel had been withheld from him, presumably a result of military politics and vested interests.

"Hmm?" Caine raised an eyebrow slightly, taking note of Leon's inquisitive gaze. "I didn't organize the mission, but I have been through the reports. There wasn't a lot to it, certainly less than you might think."

"What happened, exactly?" Leon did not want to have his questions dodged, as McGillon often did when he tried to get answers from her about the mission. He had since given up trying to get the truth out of her.

"There were Forerunner ruins found in the mine, outside the main settlement, the location you were sent to," Caine said, reciting much of this from memory, having perused the mission reports a few months ago. "The mine was closed down and a squad with an ONI researcher were sent in. That researcher had an AI with him to aid with the investigation. Somehow that team got ambushed, the official killed and the AI stolen. Now, I think the reason much of the truth was concealed from you was because of miscommunication. Your Commander, McGillon, wasn't notified of the ruins until the last minute, nor of the ONI team. No one was certain what kind of hostile force would be down there. You were essentially thrown into a situation that no one knew much about. I would say, though I cannot be certain, that you were sent in alone to limit the amount of people who would know of the stolen AI. I'm sure warning lights went on in some control centre somewhere once that AI was removed, but to let a theft of that magnitude become common knowledge would cause a lot of trouble." Caine paused, taking another sip of his scotch, watching Leon's expression turn to one of resignation. "I suppose the ONI spooks couldn't get the message to your Commander fast enough that the AI might have been stolen and by then it was too late. You tried your best to get it back, but you were alone and those terrorists even had their own cruiser. Mind you, we tracked that cruiser down and took it out, but somehow they still got the AI off of New Sanctuary. I'm thinking we're dealing with a very organized group of terrorists who somehow found out about the ONI team and the ruins and sought an opportunity to grab the AI."

Leon frowned, realizing the implication.

"You think there was a leak?" He asked.

"Possibly." Caine frowned at the prospect. "A leak, or maybe even a mole. There's no other way they could have found out."

"Who, within the UNSC, would give information to alien terrorists?"

Caine shrugged. It was something he had given some thought to, but had always assumed it to be unlikely.

"As I said, it was probably just a leak. That doesn't make it any less serious." Caine finished off his scotch after saying this, plonking the empty glass back onto the table. "I'm afraid, Lieutenant, that you were merely put into the right place at the wrong time. Nothing but miscommunication, especially on ONI's part, caused the mission at New Sanctuary to go bust."

"I can still remember the one who shot me," Leon said, recalling it vividly. "It was a Skirmisher. He had scar down one side of his face. He even spoke to me. Said something about 'judgement is coming'."

"Typical extremist talk," Caine said dismissively. "It's likely he and his buddies haven't been able to use the AI. There are a lot of security protocols on that thing and they'd need a miracle to get through them all. However, the fact is that these terrorists have been steadily increasing their activity out on the frontier. They're a real problem. I'd like your help in dealing with them, but first things first, you need to do those tests."

The idea of getting some payback against these terrorists was very appealing, but the tests were in the way and this only annoyed Leon. Even so, he knew he would have to go through them. They would probably be easy enough. He hoped they would be easy.

"I wonder what kind of 'judgement' this Skirmisher had in mind," Caine said with a grin. "It seems odd, doesn't it? We finally end the war and yet there are still people out there who'd rather it start again. And from a Skirmisher, of all things. I thought they and the rest of the Jackals preferred peace?" Caine shook his head, having intended it more as a rhetorical question. "We're already trading with them, in some areas. The thing is, peace-time can put people like you and me out of a job."

"Isn't that an indication that the peace is working out?" Leon asked.

"You could say that," Caine replied. "We won't have true peace until we get rid of these terrorists, regardless of what species they are. I've even been given the mission of putting together a special team to directly combat them."

"You have?" Leon leaned forwards slightly, interested to hear more.

"Don't worry, Leon, you're welcome to join it, once you get through your testing," Caine said.

Leon nodded. It seemed like a decent compromise, considering how long he had been out of action and the extent of his injuries. It still angered him that the mission to New Sanctuary had been a complete screw up, how he had been the victim of miscommunication and a lack of proper intel. Caine seemed understanding about it, having not been

directly affiliated with the organization of the mission.

"I'd hate to see your abilities wasted," Caine said. "I'm confident you can prove that you're ready to get back to work, it's just that I need the approval of the higher-ups. Believe it or not, but there are people I take orders from." He paused, giving a friendly smile. "I think that's all for now, Lieutenant. Be sure to check in tomorrow morning with Lieutenant-Commander Serena."

"The Spartan-II?"

"That's her. She'll be overseeing your tests."

Leon was not sure what to think about this. Maybe the tests would be a bit trickier than he had first thought, especially since a Spartan would be organizing them. He honestly did not know what to expect and that uncertainty bothered him.

Rising out of his chair, Leon gave a quick salute before turning around and leaving. He had the rest of today to prepare as best he could. That included overcoming his sore back and legs, though dosing up on painkillers was something he would like to avoid. If he ended up out in the field, there was no guarantee he would get the painkilling drugs. It was best he keep off of them and get used to the soreness, the very same soreness he had needed to tolerate for the last few months.

\* \* \*

><p>Leon found himself in one of the main buildings the next day, in a large training area that was vacant save for some exercise equipment. It was a fairly sparse room, mostly grey in colour with no windows. The air conditioning ensured it was at a comfortable temperature, but it was not a lot of help when one was running kilometres on a treadmill.</p>

Things had started off straightforward enough. Serena was standing nearby while a computer in the corner took readings and collated results, leaving the Lieutenant-Commander as a mere supervisor. She said nothing, save for the basic greeting she had given Leon when he had showed up. She had directed him to the treadmill and had set it to a fairly lengthy run, leaving Leon to complete it while the sensors set into the machine kept tabs on how well his body was coping.

It was strange to be running so much after all this time spent hanging around a hospital, waiting for his legs to return to proper working order. Leon had figured the tests would be easy, but he was surprised to find himself struggling as the treadmill kept going and going, with several kilometres down and plenty more to go. He kept quiet while Serena watched, her expression neutral with no indication of what she was thinking. She had a very cold demeanour, practically emotionless, something that Leon was all too familiar with. He had been much the same until his experiences through the war had loosened him up a little. Serena, on the other hand, had hardened up even more because of the war. Leon had heard a few things about her, mostly through gossip. Serena was one of the last Spartan-IIIs, most of the others being either dead or missing in action. Those others that were still alive had their whereabouts closely under wraps, presumably on important missions to God-only-knew-where.

Leon was pushing himself as best he could but his back was slowing him down, his legs almost buckling under the strain. This only angered him, causing him to push himself even harder. His determination only caused him more pain, but he clenched his jaw and kept going. Serena watched on, her face emotionless as she regarded Leon and then the computer near her that was taking in data.

Leon was determined not to wash out. He would be relegated to another few months in hospital if that happened and he had already spent enough time in that godforsaken and sterile environment to drive him mad. Much to his disdain, his legs buckled beneath him and he failed to rebalance, causing himself to fall forwards against the treadmill before sliding down the control panel and onto the moving track. It stopped suddenly, a result of the emergency switch that activated once the sensors detected the user falling, preventing him from being forced under the machine by the once moving track. Out of breath and drenched in sweat, Leon slowly sat up, watching as Serena walked over and regarded him with a disapproving gaze.

"You have an hour to get ready for the next test," Serena said. "Keep hydrated and go freshen up."

Leon simply nodded in response, slowly rising to his feet. His legs ached and his back was shooting spasms of pain straight up his spine. To top things off, his right hand had started shaking. Containing the anger he felt towards himself, he made his way out of the room, entering the corridor and crossing the hall to the bathroom. It did not take long for him to take a long, hearty drink of water from one of the taps there before he gave himself a quick shower. Changing into a clean uniform, he made his way out, finding Serena in the hall conversing with Elise McGillon. Leon approached them, with Serena heading off and leaving Elise who turned around and greeted him with a warm smile.

"How are you doing?" Elise asked.

"Worse than I expected," Leon answered truthfully. "I'm even beginning to think it was a mistake, trying to get out of that hospital."

Elise frowned.

"Did you ever think that maybe most of your problems are in your head? That you're letting this defeatist attitude of yours influence your physical performance?"

>Leon knew all about that sort of thing. They had covered it in his training, that a negative outlook on things could have such an influence on one's physical prowess. He was not sure whether it was completely accurate to reality.<p>

"I don't know. All I can say is that I'm trying," Leon said. "That's all I can do. Besides, why are you here? Haven't you got things to do?"

"I thought I'd see how you were going," Elise said. "Sergeant Nevas, at the hospital, told me to tell you that she wishes you the best. I think she has a thing for you."

Valerie might have been the only friend Leon had made in the

hospital, despite her eccentricities. As for her attraction to him, Leon paid it little attention. It was not something that was on his mind very often, though he did admit to himself that Valerie was an attractive woman.

"Is that all?" Leon asked.

"You're not in a good mood, are you?"

"I'd be in a better one if I didn't feel like shit." Leon stuffed his right hand into one pocket, worried that Elise might notice it shaking. "What frustrates me is that I've run great distances before without a lot of trouble, but on the treadmill in there just before..." He nodded in the direction of the training room. "I was struggling to run as far as I used to be able to."

"As I said, maybe you should start feeling confident in yourself," Elise said.

"I am confident. At least, I was until I started tiring. Look, I know that you're trying to help and all but...I don't need it." Leon shook his head. "I just want to get through today. If I needed your help, I'd have asked for it."

Elise did not look impressed by the comment but simply nodded in understanding.

"You're very difficult to work with sometimes, Lieutenant," she said. She turned around and walked away, leaving Leon alone in the corridor.

With about twenty minutes to spare, he had little else to do but wait around. Serena showed up when there was five minutes of his break left, directing him to one of the outdoor firing ranges. Going outside and into the sunlight did provide a welcome change of scenery. He squinted momentarily as his eyes took a moment to adjust to the change in lighting. There were several booths on each of the different ranges, with Leon getting an entire range to himself with a number of different weapons arranged on a rack at one wall.

The firing range was a mostly concrete and wood affair with several targets, ones that were projected holographically and tied to a data collecting computer, lined up upon the range at varying distances. Serena was there again, along with another young male instructor in a Marines uniform standing by the rack of weapons. He walked over to Leon and handed him an unloaded side-arm, an M6H handgun. There were a couple of magazines sitting on the bench within the booth in front of Leon.

"Four magazines, two targets," the male instructor said. "First target is twenty metres, second is forty. Aim for the centre of mass and the computer will calculate your score after each target."

It was simple enough. Leon loaded the pistol, neglecting to use the ear protectors since he considered them unnecessary. He had heard weapons fire so many times before without the need for such protection that he doubted protecting his ears for this one time would make an awful lot of difference.

The instructor went to the computer that was on a table nearby while

Serena watched with a discerning gaze, almost as if she doubted Leon would be able to do any good with the weapon. Leon also had some doubt himself, especially since his right hand had started to shake again.

Nonetheless, he gripped the pistol tightly in his right hand and walked up to the booth, taking aim before putting his left hand in a support position underneath. This caused both his hands to start shaking as he attempted to line up a decent shot. He felt both Serena and the instructor watching him, their eyes may as well have been burning into the back of his head by the way he could sense their gazes. Serena looked as passive as ever while the instructor had an uncertain look on his face, having noticed Leon's unstable hands.

Leon pulled the trigger, feeling the weapon buckle slightly in his grip. The shot flew wide, hitting the edge of the holographic target. A red light came on where the bullet had passed through, appearing right on the left edge of the figure represented in the hologram. Leon adjusted his aim and fired again, this time the shot swung to the right. At twenty metres, he was having difficulty hitting anything. Swallowing before taking a breath, Leon tried his best to steady his hand before firing off the rest of the magazine. Some of the shots did connect with the target's torso, but they were spread out and on the far edges of the centre target circle.

Pausing, Leon lowered the weapon and reloaded. This action was one he had little difficulty with as he ejected the empty magazine and quickly slid in a fully loaded one with no trouble. He ignored the pain in his back as best he could while he raised the pistol again and took aim.

He fired another shot, this one flying a bit too high from the centre of mass, clipping the holographic target's "head". Leon, with a growing sense of frustration, kicked the wooden bench in front of him. It fell over with a loud \_clunk!\_ Seizing the opportunity, he began to close the distance between him and the target, firing again and again as he walked, each shot moving closer and closer towards the target's centre.

The magazine spent, he turned around and regarded Serena and the instructor.

"There's still the target at forty metres, Lieutenant," Serena said drily, not amused.

\* \* \*

><p>It did not take long for the results to be collated. General Caine sat at his desk, regarding the computer terminal in front of him, occasionally looking over at Leon who sat in a chair across from him.</p>

It had been a day since the testing, much of it having been somewhat standard fare. Serena had written a detailed report about Leon's performance, one that noted that despite the Lieutenant's potential, Serena recommended he remain out of active service for a while longer.

"Well, Lieutenant," Caine said, viewing the results on his computer

terminal. He then looked towards the Spartan, a slight grin appearing on his face. "You passed, by a very narrow margin. I'm almost reluctant to put you back on duty, but the results speak for themselves."

Leon would have given a sigh of relief if he did not feel so disappointed with himself. He had been expecting to do far better, and though his physical performance was still in excess of that of a normal human being, he was still past his prime. He had been out of action too long, reduced to waiting around in a hospital while doctors milled about him, running tests and asking him questions.

"I'm going to schedule you a few sessions with the counsellor," Caine said, "For your own good. I think some of your performance issues stem from mental, not physical, difficulties."

"Are you saying I'm unstable?" Leon asked.

"Not 'unstable', " Caine said, shaking his head. "You put a lot of the blame for the failure of the mission on New Sanctuary on yourself. This much is clear and it might be hard to accept anything else, but the truth is much of what happened there was out of your control. This is probably having some effect on your overall physical performance."

Leon sat back in his chair, giving a resigned sigh. He was glad that he had passed, but that still did not mean he was happy with how well he had done.

"You should start feeling a bit better about yourself," Caine continued. "You've been through a lot, survived a lot. You should feel lucky." He paused, before adding, "The Lieutenant-Commander noted that you had some difficulty handling firearms."

"I'm just a bit rusty," Leon said.

"It happens to all of us. We let our abilities go to waste for too long and we find it's suddenly a lot more difficult to utilize them. I used to be an excellent baseball player." He nodded towards one of the glass cabinets on the wall to his left, one that contained several trophies. "That was so long ago that if you were to stick a bat in my hands now, I'd probably have difficulty hitting the ball with it. It's the same with you, Lieutenant. You've been in that hospital long enough for things that were once easy for you to do to become more difficult. This is exacerbated by your physical injuries."

"I know I can do better."

"I'm sure you can. Now that you're out of that hospital, you can get back to training properly. That includes firearms training as well." Caine paused, checking if he had missed anything. "As for that new team I mentioned, I'll be sure to put you on it."

"What exactly will this team do?" Leon asked, curious. He was grateful that he would be out of that damn hospital, even more so that he would be put straight back to work.

"It's a joint operation between us, the Elites and the Jackals,"

Caine said. "We all want these terrorist elements eliminated, so we've decided to work together. Consider it a means of improving relations."

Leon was surprised to hear that they would be working with aliens, but he was not completely adverse to it. He had fought alongside Sangheili during the last months of the war, when they had opted to join the humans when the Prophets had betrayed them and replaced them with the Brutes. They were very able fighters, if unlikely allies.

"The aliens we'll be working with will be arriving in under a week," Caine continued. "I'm no fan of them, considering what they did to us during the war, but times have changed and as a result, we have to alter our beliefs to fit those times. No use holding a grudge when there are far bigger problems, these terrorists being one."

"Who else will be in the team?"

"The Lieutenant-Commander, for one. And Commander McGillon will have a more supervisory role in it. I'm still deciding on some of the combat personnel, but you'll find out who when I bring you all together. As for the Elites, I know they have some experienced officer coming in, along with some top-tier Jackal soldiers."

Leon nodded. It certainly sounded diverse. Whether it would actually work out was yet to be seen.

"Truthfully, I think we should deal with the problem ourselves," Caine said, his tone turning a bit more serious. "The stolen AI is our problem. As I'm sure working with aliens will be a unique learning experience, I can't shake this feeling that we can't trust them entirely. Especially the Elites. The only reason they haven't started another war is because they're in no shape to do so, lacking the ships and manpower."

"Isn't it better to improve relations before they build more ships and gain more soldiers?" Leon asked. Caine nodded in agreement, but still looked doubtful.

"Yes, I'm sure it is. I still don't think we can trust them completely. The terrorists we're fighting are aliens, from both the Elite and Jackal species. There's one reason we shouldn't trust them completely."

"I don't think they trust us much, either."

"That's true. Nonetheless, we're going to have to go along with it. I think it'll be for the best, in the end." Caine opened a drawer at his desk and pulled out a cigar from it. He cut one end off with a small cigar cutter he removed from the same drawer before he took a silver metal lighter from one pocket.

Leon thought over all that had happened while Caine prepared his cigar. The Spartan was glad to be back, even if it meant working with aliens. Caine's doubts about them were well founded, considering the past they had with the Sangheili and Kig-Yar, but there would probably be some benefit for the different species to work together. He was not looking forward to having Serena on the team and giving orders, as he got the impression that the fellow Spartan doubted his

abilities, especially after his performance in the tests she had supervised.

"Well, Lieutenant," Caine said, puffing on his newly lit cigar.  
"Would you like a cigar?"

"No, thanks."

"Understandable. I'm not even sure why I smoke them myself." He took it from his mouth, blowing smoke. "I know it's a sore point for you, Lieutenant, but if your back is giving you trouble, take some pain relief medication. I know you'd prefer not to, but for your own good do it."

"How'd..."

"The counsellor, and Commander McGillon, told me," Caine interrupted, before Leon could continue. "Do you want me to order you to take your medication?"

Leon shook his head.

"No, sir." As much as he disliked the idea, he would probably have to change his line of thinking in regards to his sore back and legs.

"Very good. Now, I'll be sure to notify you when I've finalized my choices for this new team." He paused, taking another drag on his cigar. "You're dismissed, Lieutenant. Glad to have you back on duty."

## 8. Teamwork

\*\*Teamwork\*\*

January 19th, 2558

The human world of Reach still carried some scars of the war. Entire regions had been reduced to smouldering craters, sand turned to glass from the heat of plasma weaponry. The humans had done what they could to start repairing the damage done, but it was fairly slow work that had seen most of the resettlements occur in the unaffected regions. This included Pike's Creek, a lush forest area located within a valley that ran through a fairly mountainous area. A river wended its way past the settlement and through the valley, before it opened out onto a wide fresh-water lake about twenty kilometres north. Viewing the region from the opened side of a Spirit drop-ship, it was quite a breathtaking view. There was much to admire on this world, even if it carried the scars of battles that had occurred in the past. It was late morning, with the sun gradually making its way up to its highest point. The sky was cloudy in places and the air smelt of moisture, an indication that there would soon be rain.

Kal'Shayar stood by the opened doors of the drop-ship, hand gripping one of the handlebars in the ceiling above him. They were descending onto a designated landing area near the human military base, with one human in a bright yellow jacket directing them down with two brightly coloured sticks. It had been a long trip on the cruiser and Kal'Shayar was grateful to finally be off it, bored of the mazelike

corridors and the muted blue lighting. To be outside in the natural world was far more preferable.

Standing behind him, within one of the arms of the horseshoe-shaped craft was Major Jerashar and Javal, the two other main alien members of the proposed new team. Javal had a disapproving look on his face as he regarded the human personnel milling about outside as the drop-ship touched down. Kal'Shayar was the first out, his booted feet crunching on the gravel below. Jerashar, fully kitted out in crimson armour, followed straight after him. Javal took a moment, eyeing carefully the armed guards who had started to approach, before he followed suit, stepping out of the drop-ship and into the cool forest air.

The military base was quite large, sitting on the edge of an even larger settlement comprised of mostly rectangular prefab structures. The military base had far more permanent structures, including a concrete and steel administration building that towered over everything else. It was typical of human architecture, very utilitarian in appearance comprised of mostly grey concrete and steel pylons. It did have a very 'official' look to it, made even more prominent by the flags flying on masts at the roof.

Two armed soldiers stopped ahead of them, watching the alien arrivals closely. Jerashar moved forwards with the intent of asking a question but another human, this one clearly a female, approached and spoke to him. She was tall, perhaps as tall as Kal'Shayar, dressed in a grey uniform with brown hair that was tied back in a neat ponytail.

"Jerashar Wittron?" She asked, looking at the Sangheili who towered over her by about two feet.

"Yes?"

"I'm Commander Elise McGillon. I'll be escorting you and your companions to the main briefing room. Follow me." She turned around and started walking, with Jerashar falling into step behind her. Kal'Shayar did the same, as did Javal, who had a rather distasteful look on his face as he looked around, taking note of the human personnel nearby who were watching the group with careful, and sometimes odd, gazes.

There was not a lot of trust here. Kal'Shayar could feel it, the unease that pervaded the air and the expressions on the faces of the humans. It was understandable, given all that had happened between the different races but it also made the whole situation far less comfortable. Kal'Shayar could feel human eyes on him as they made their way through the compound, heading for the main building. They were watching him, perhaps even judging him. It was quite an odd sight for a few aliens to be on the base, so the looks were to be expected. There had been no major collaboration between the different species for some time, especially in this manner.

Kal'Shayar glanced over at Javal, who looked rather annoyed. His dislike of humans was obvious. Kal'Shayar wondered if that would impair his judgement when they started working with these humans and thought it might be best to reign in the younger Kig-Yar's prejudices before they got out of hand. For now though, they followed the Commander. Kal'Shayar had never thought much about humans, but to be

here now at a time when they were not trying to kill him made him appreciate them some more. They were a strong species and their determination had seen them through the hardships of the war, even when the odds had been sorely stacked against them. It also made him realize that the Kig-Yar and the humans were no so different: both races had the same level of intelligence with similar values, such as the importance of family and friendship. There was even the fact that the humans had gender equality, judging from the female officers milling about, something that the Kig-Yar also had (though their females were a majority in high positions). Kal'Shayar appreciated strong women and one of the reasons he had chosen his mate was because of her unmatched resolve and impressive combat abilities. He decided to stow any thoughts of her aside for now.

The group made their way to a set of double doors at the rear of the main building. They opened automatically, with Elise taking the group inside, leading them through grey carpeted hallways and up a flight of stairs. Jerashar had to duck his head down now and then as most of the doorways were simply too short for him to completely stand upright.

The main briefing room was located at the end of the top floor, close to the main offices. It was a large rectangular room, with a security checkpoint outside its entrance and a large rectangular table set in its middle. Elise stopped at the security checkpoint, the guard there not at all fazed by the presence of the aliens. He had been expecting them and after Elise showed him her identification he allowed them through. They walked through a scanner, which pinpointed any weapons they might have been carrying. Only Javal was held up by this, as a warning bell sounded when he walked through. With some reluctance he removed the small blade he had hidden in the armour at his shin, handing it to the guard before entering the briefing room.

A human male with close-cropped greying hair, dull blue eyes who was also wearing a green jacket adorned with multi-coloured ribbons was standing by the door, ready to greet them. He held out his hand to shake each of them, a human form of greeting that Kal'Shayar had no issue playing along with. Javal seemed a bit hesitant to shake hands with a human and so his handshake with the man was short and half-hearted, being quickly broken off.

There were a few other humans in the room, seated at different spots on the table. One was a youngish male with pale skin and short dark hair who regarded the aliens with a curious gaze. His uniform was grey, much like the Commander's but of a lower rank. A tall and well muscled woman sat across from him, watching the aliens enter with no discernible trace of emotion. Her blonde hair was of moderate length, her blue eyes piercing. She was also in a grey uniform. Finally there was another human male, a man in a green camouflage uniform who was watching the aliens enter with what Kal'Shayar assumed to be a fascinated gaze.

"I'm General Nathaniel Caine," the man in the green jacket said, gesturing to the table. Kal'Shayar sat down in one of the seats, finding it surprisingly comfortable, padded in all the right places. Javal sat across from him, his expression one of uncertainty. Jerashar squeezed himself into a chair at the end of the table, with Commander McGillon settling into the seat on Kal'Shayar's right. She did not seem bothered by the fact that a Skirmisher was seated next to her. Kal'Shayar could smell her scent, a mix of personal hygiene

products and a natural, but rather plain odour. Kal'Shayar briefly wondered what he smelt like to the human and whether or not it was unpleasant. She might have simply been too courteous to mention it.

Caine walked over to the head of the table, gesturing to the young human male.

"This here is Lieutenant Spartan A-079, 'Leon' as his 'normal' name goes," Caine said.

A Spartan? Kal'Shayar was familiar with the term. The Sangheili, during the war, had labelled these warriors "demons" and they apparently had abilities that far exceeded any regular human. Jerashar had noticeably bristled upon hearing the word but remained silent, his chair creaking under his weight.

"And this is Lieutenant-Commander Spartan-049, Serena." Caine gestured towards the tall blonde-haired female. "She will be my second-in-command for this operation." As he sat down in the seat at the head of the table, he nodded towards the other human male, the one in the green camouflage uniform. "That's Colonel Paul Green," Caine said.

"Greetings," he said with a grin, beaming it towards Jerashar who lacked any visible amusement. "Never thought I'd be sitting down in a room talking with some aliens, but I guess life's made better by little surprises like that. If I had been told six years ago I'd end up in some sort of joint-species military operations, I wouldn't have believed it."

"Finally, you're familiar with Commander Elise McGillon." Caine glanced towards the Commander, who nodded in acknowledgement. "With our introductions done..."

"I'm Jerashar Wittron," the Sangheili interrupted, his voice deep and authoritative. It was the sort of voice one could not help but pay attention to. Jerashar gestured to the two Kig-Yar sitting at the table. "May I introduce Major Javal and Champion Kal'Shayar, respectively."

Leon was watching Kal'Shayar with a careful gaze, something the Skirmisher noticed. It was as if the human was attempting to work out if he was a threat or not, presumably a result of whatever distrust he carried of the species from his experiences during the war.

"Something you wish to say to me, Spartan?" Kal'Shayar asked. The human language, "English", was one that had taken some time to grasp, with some of their words a bit difficult to articulate. The translators helped somewhat, but he preferred proper communication rather than having to rely on some often unreliable device.

Leon said nothing. He shifted his gaze, directing it towards the General who had since flipped up the screen of a computer terminal set into his place at the table.

"At least we won't need any of those dodgy translators," Caine commented. No one else seemed very talkative and Kal'Shayar could see that the General was doing his best to prevent any awkward silences.

"We're here for a reason. Not only should this operation improve relations between our species, but it should help put down these troublesome terrorist elements that have been cropping up. The one in particular we're all concerned about is the same one that is responsible for the theft of a military Artificial Intelligence." Caine paused, his gaze going towards Jerashar. "How many have been assigned to this operation, Major?"

"The three of us," the Sangheili replied, gesturing to the two Kig-Yar and himself, "And I have a squad of experienced Kig-Yar soldiers at my disposal."

"Is that it?" Caine looked unimpressed.

"It is all that the Field Master would spare for this mission," Jerashar replied, unconcerned. "I think it is enough. Truthfully, the terrorist problem affects you humans far more than it does us, especially the Sangheili. We have many troubles of our own, most that our leaders have prioritized well above this joint operation."

Caine was silent for a moment. It was clear that he was disappointed. Kal'Shayar knew that Jerashar was telling the truth: the terrorists in question were a secondary problem for the Sangheili, as they had problems on their own worlds that seemed more important than some far flung terrorist organization that had opted to target humans.

"Don't forget, General," the female Spartan interjected, looking at Caine, "There are still Covenant loyalists out there. I think that the Sangheili are more concerned for the trouble they might be trying to cause than some minor terrorist organization."

"I don't think we're talking about a 'minor' terrorist organization," Caine said, shaking his head. "This affects us all. It's clear to me that the state of affairs in our corner of the galaxy is very delicate. The war cost us all dearly, both in terms of lives lost as well as materials destroyed. Our fleets, even six years after the war ended, are still nowhere near their former strength. The Kig-Yar have opted for a more isolationist approach..." He looked towards Kal'Shayar, his expression grim. "But, personally, I doubt that's the proper way forwards. We should be helping each other out."

"We have been trading," Javal said sternly, as if Caine had insulted their race somehow. The implication that the Kig-Yar had been doing nothing to help the galactic community was there in what Caine had said, but Kal'Shayar knew for a fact that the trading Javal had mentioned was minor in nature. He had no formidable knowledge of politics, aside from what had happened on his home-world, Sauem. The government there had been reluctant to get involved with any other species, deciding instead to focus on rebuilding (and that included replenishing the dwindling Skirmisher sub-species population).

"Nowhere near as much as we should," Caine countered, frowning towards Javal. It was clear he sensed the young hybrid's distrust and certainly did not approve of it. "What we have right now is peace. A very delicate peace, especially between us humans and the Elites..." He paused for a second, realizing his mistake. "I mean, the Sangheili. It won't take much to upset that peace. Even now we've got those Storm Covenant types running around, stirring up trouble. There was an attack on Earth, just recently."

"An attack?" Kal'Shayar had not heard about this and found it surprising that anyone had been game enough to do such a thing. Who could have committed such an act?

"I'm not privy to the details, but it wasn't an attack by the Covenant," Caine replied. "It was something else. And this is one reason why we have to work together. The galaxy is big and we're only in a small part of it. We have no idea what's out there, waiting for us. We keep expanding and eventually we're going to find something and that 'something' might just want to kill us all. That's why we have to keep the peace, as hard as it might be. That means we have to work together to fight terrorists, loyalists...whatever else might threaten that peace."

Caine did make a compelling point. Still, it was unlikely the Sangheili would commit any more people to the mission.

"I think we should get to business, General," Serena said. Caine nodded before he looked to Green. The Colonel had been sitting back in his chair rather casually whilst picking at his fingernails. Aware that attention had suddenly shifted to him, he sat up and quickly composed himself.

"I've been doing some research," Colonel Green said, leaning forwards in his chair as he flipped up the screen of the computer terminal at his place on the table. "There's a movement out there, they've got their own little following and everything. I've got a lot of unofficial sources out on the frontier, so I was able to put together some reports concerning what we might be dealing with in regards to these terrorists." A holographic projection appeared floating over the middle of the table as Green tapped away at his computer terminal, putting up a topographical map of some place called "New Sanctuary".

"New Sanctuary is one of our Outer Colonies," Caine said, watching the holographic map of the region slowly rotate, with a mine highlighted in red. "What you're looking at is a map of a desert region, the location of an important ore mine. A few months ago, the mine closed down as the miners had struck Forerunner ruins."

"Forerunner?" Kal'Shayar knew who he meant: The "gods" that the Prophets had forced most of those in the Covenant to believe in. The cause of the war in the first place, but really the Forerunners had been nothing more than extinct mortals with advanced technology, certainly falling short of their status as "gods".

"A team was sent in, with an official from our Office of Naval Intelligence, in order to investigate. The official carried an Artificial Intelligence with him. Somehow, the 'terrorists' had set a trap for the team, killing them all and taking the AI."

"I am aware of this," Jerashar said.

Caine looked at the Sangheili, pondering what he might add. He knew he needed to make a convincing case, as there was nothing stopping the Sangheili and Kig-Yar from pulling their support in the operation completely.

"Are you aware of the exact nature of what happened?" Caine asked.  
"How a group of alien terrorists, most of them Kig-Yar but several of them Sangheili, found out about the discovery of Forerunner ruins on a human-controlled world? Because that's what we've been trying to work out. How could they have found out? Why would they be on one of our planets? How could they have known about the team and the AI the official had been carrying?"

"I almost got it back," the male Spartan commented, looking distant, probably remembering the whole ordeal.

"The Lieutenant here was sent in to investigate the missing team," Caine continued, gesturing towards the Spartan, "And that's how we were able to confirm the theft of the AI and what kind of hostile force we were dealing with. At first we assumed it was loyalists, but that was quickly debunked after some research. Colonel Green here is a private contractor, a man who has many connections outside of the military who has been able to gather some interesting information."

Kal'Shayar was not fond of mercenaries. Colonel Green was just that: a man who was only in it for the money, lacking any amount of honour whose loyalty was to a pay-check. There had been a recent rise in the amount of Kig-Yar mercenaries, as the lack of any war had put a lot of soldiers out of business. Unfit to work anywhere else, they had decided to hire themselves out to whoever required their services. Kal'Shayar had sometimes thought he may end up going the same way, but his responsibilities to his recently deceased daughter had ensured that he remained at home. Now he was here, hopefully to become part of something important, something that may return some degree of purpose back into his life.

"We're dealing with a group of mostly ex-soldiers, war veterans, that sort of thing," Green said. He pressed a button at his terminal, replacing the holographic map of the New Sanctuary desert with a few three-dimensional images of these "terrorists", or at least those suspected to be in the organization. There were two Kig-Yar and one Sangheili, none of which Kal'Shayar recognized.

"We're talking about a large organization consisting of disgruntled soldiers all working together. I've got no idea as to what their purpose is, other than the fact they're trying to upset the balance of power in the galaxy. It's rumoured that they may in fact be trying to start another war. As for my personal opinion, I think we're dealing with a pack of rebels without a cause. A pack of very organized and well-armed rebels. The three pictured are three of the ones the Lieutenant killed on his mission on New Sanctuary. We cross-referenced their DNA through databases supplied by both the Sangheili and Kig-Yar. All three fought in the war and all three dropped off the radar a few years ago, clearly indicating when they became part of this terrorist organization. As for the organization itself, I have no idea what it's called. My sources tell me they've been setting up a formidable presence on some frontier worlds, including Paradise Falls, a former colony world that has only just begun being resettled."

Kal'Shayar listened to all this carefully, trying to put the faces displayed to anyone he might have known. Unfortunately, the two Kig-Yar who the Lieutenant had killed on his mission were two that Kal'Shayar had never seen before, so he was of little help in

determining the nature of these terrorists and what they might have been trying to do. It seemed likely they were dealing with some kind of rogue element who were simply trying to ignite further conflict, perhaps in an effort to become useful again, as strange as that sounded. Perhaps they wished to disturb the peace as they believed it would benefit their races?

"As for the AI they stole," Caine said, pressing a button on his computer terminal that switched off the holographic projections, "It's probably likely they will not be able to utilize it. Such an AI has many advanced security protocols and they've had it with them for a few months now and no damage has been caused by it. Their presence on Paradise Falls is likely to be the result of them using the world as a place to organize, a staging ground if you will. We would not have much else to go on, except for a very recent development."

Commander McGillon leaned forwards where she sat, curious.

"What kind of development?" She asked, frowning. "And why wasn't I notified of this earlier?"

"I was only able to confirm its nature shortly before this meeting," Caine said. "As I said, the stolen AI would be difficult to utilize but suppose they had the means to hack into it, perhaps use it to some extent..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "We'd all be in serious trouble. I was sent a report only hours ago, collated by one of the more advanced AIs we have monitoring the entire UNSC network. Our network is very advanced, with wireless signals being bounced off of buoys throughout our space. It's not difficult for us to track a particular computer down on this network using sophisticated AIs, but I had to call back and confirm the nature of the report."

Pressing a button at his terminal, another holographic projection appeared: it was of a vast web-like structure, with small dots spaced along it. It zoomed in to one particular point marked in red. Kal'Shayar realized he was looking at a symbolic representation of the human military computer network, with the red dot representing a planet. That planet was labelled as 'Paradise Falls'.

"Ninety-two hours ago, an AI with the same credentials as the one that was stolen was detected on the network, emanating from a computer terminal on Paradise Falls. This wouldn't be out of the ordinary were it not for the fact that the people on Paradise Falls have no military-grade AI. In fact, I don't think they have any sort of AI. They only just started resettling the planet."

"You think it's these terrorists?" Leon asked, curiosity very much piqued. There was a look in his eyes, as if he was eager to find the people responsible. It was a look of vengeance, Kal'Shayar could tell that much. Something had happened to the Spartan to make him eager to find these terrorists.

"Most likely, but the AI was detected on the network only for a few minutes before it disconnected. I think that these terrorists might have been trying to exploit it, but had to disconnect as it's likely it attempted to call for help. Perhaps this connection trace it provided was the call for help. There's no real way to know."

Jerashar looked unconvinced, leaning forwards slightly where he sat, his gaze going straight to the Colonel.

"Is this all we have to go on?" He asked, his deep voice laced with doubt. "A brief trace on your network, nothing else?"

"It's better than nothing," Caine said defensively. "That AI could wreak havoc on your computer systems. It's quite well known amongst computer experts in the UNSC that your alien computer systems are easily broken by our AIs. Imagine what could happen if one got into the Sangheili network, from any one of your worlds. You'd have the power going out, ships falling out of the sky, that sort of thing."

"But there is no guarantee that these terrorists will target us."

"And there's no guarantee that they won't," Caine replied, narrowing his gaze. "You're here to help us, Major. You and the rest of your little team. You should at least be grateful that we have some kind of lead. That way we have a chance of stopping these bastards."

"Bastards?" Kal'Shayar was not quite familiar with this human term.

"It's an insult," McGillon said from his right.

Kal'Shayar nodded, but was still a bit confused. Working with these humans would prove to be a very interesting experience, he could be sure of that.

"We even got the exact computer terminal from where the connection occurred," Caine said. "It was from a building in the main settlement, a settlement that had been mostly destroyed during the war but somehow someone got a computer functioning there, complete with a connection to the network. The address corresponds to an old museum building."

"I presume that is where we will be heading?" Jerashar asked.

"Well, once we get this team properly organized we'll prepare to leave," Caine said. "There's a destroyer on its way here that'll serve as transport. I think now would be a good time for anyone to voice any questions they might have."

"How many people have you assigned to this operation?" Kal'Shayar asked. He was curious to see if the humans treated the situation seriously enough to put more than a pair of Spartans, a mercenary and a Navy Commander on the case.

"All personnel on the destroyer, for starters," Caine said. "That includes a full platoon of marines. Complement that with your force of Kig-Yar soldiers and we have ourselves a decent little army." He smiled, as if the thought amused him. Kal'Shayar found the General to be a bit odd, as if there was something not quite right about him. He supposed it just stemmed from his inexperience of working with the species, but nonetheless he had his uncertainties about each of the humans in the room.

"I never thought I would be working with humans," Javal said, not to anyone in particular but still loud enough for Caine to hear.

"Do you have a problem, Jerval?"

"It's Javal," the young Kig-Yar snapped. Caine looked annoyed, clearly unimpressed with Javal's apprehensive demeanour.

"No need to get all worked up," Caine said. "Besides, don't you think it's best if we work together, rather than fight? I think we'd make fine allies. We're quite the same, aren't we?"

"In some ways," Kal'Shayar interjected, causing Caine to look his way. "But in other ways, we are quite different."

"Diversity's a good thing." Caine leaned back in his chair, taking a look around the room. "The fact that we're in the same room together, actually having a fairly civil discussion, is evidence enough that we have what it takes to work together and make fine allies."

There was a pause. He switched off the current holographic projection before he nodded in the direction of the door.

"That's it for now. I wish to speak with Major Jerashar concerning the troops he can commit to the operation, but as for everyone else, you're dismissed. Javal and Kal'Shayar, you two are free to wander the base, just keep out of any restricted areas. We don't want any trouble. Perhaps Commander McGillon could show the two of you to your rooms?"

The other humans began to leave, with Javal rising out of his seat and departing with them. Kal'Shayar remained where he sat for a moment, unsure on what to do next before he stood up and made his way out of the room, followed by Commander McGillon. With the briefing room behind them, the group had scattered, heading in their own directions. Kal'Shayar decided to fall into step behind the Commander.

Javal walked up alongside him, with Commander McGillon a few paces ahead.

"I don't like this mission," Javal said quietly. "It is as if we are wasting our talents on some pointless venture. The humans should be dealing with their own problems, not calling on us to help them."

"This affects us all," Kal'Shayar said. He was uncertain as to how big a threat the terrorists might actually be to his species, but it seemed better to play it safe and eradicate these rogue elements before they proved to be a real threat.

"Alright you two," Commander McGillon said, rather confident despite the fact she was in the company of two Kig-Yar. She turned around facing the both of them. "Do you want me to show you to your accommodations?"

"That would be most welcome," Kal'Shayar said. He got a good feeling from the Commander, as if he could rely on this human. She seemed friendly enough, far more friendly than the other humans had been. The two Spartans in particular had looked most distrustful of the

alien visitors.

Elise took the two of them outside and to one of the smaller buildings. It was some sort of barracks, although it was empty of any human soldiers, probably being relegated to be used as accommodation for visitors. Kal'Shayar found his chest to already be here, carried off of the drop-ship by someone. Javal's squad was also here, grouped at the far end, sitting around and talking amongst themselves. Elise saw them and thought it best not to get too close to the dozen or so Kig-Yar, instead preferring to remain by the entrance. Javal headed inside, joining up with his squad. Kal'Shayar stayed for a moment, looking at Elise, taking note of the anxious look on her face.

"Something wrong?" He asked. It felt odd, engaging in casual conversation with a human, but at the same time it felt somewhat refreshing.

"This is just a new experience for me," she said, giving him an awkwardly friendly smile. "It's nothing personal. I missed out on most of the war and was stationed on an untouched colony world until the closing months. I haven't had a lot of combat experience. Even in this new team, I'm going to be in a more 'supervisory' role, as the General put it." She looked disappointed. "I feel like I should at least get the opportunity to prove myself in a fight."

"Maybe you will," Kal'Shayar said. "It is not as exciting as you may think it is. I was raised to believe that combat was the only thing fit for me, being a Skirmisher. It was not until I was made to face death on several occasions that I realized that war is not as glorious as my parents told me it would be. You should be careful what you wish for, in regards to being given a chance to prove yourself."

"Good point." Elise relaxed where she stood. "You have a good grasp of English. I didn't think you Kig-Yar could even say our words."

"There are many things about us you do not know." It was certainly true, given that this was the first time he had ever spoken to a human. For Elise, it was the first time she had spoken to a Kig-Yar. They were both completely out of their element but oddly enough, Kal'Shayar felt quite comfortable. Perhaps it was this human, with her confident posture and friendly demeanour.

"And I'm sure there are plenty of things about us humans you don't know," Elise said.

"Then we have much to learn from each other." Kal'Shayar paused, forming the Kig-Yar equivalent of a smile. "Perhaps we could talk some more. I have many questions about your people."

He was genuinely curious about the humans as a race, as most of what he knew about them had come from gossip amongst soldiers and reports by loyal Covenant soldiers during the war, not to mention his personal experiences in the war that usually consisted of shooting at human soldiers, occasionally getting close enough to see the terror on their faces. These were not things he liked to remember.

"We could do that," Elise said. "Right now though, I have to return

to my duties. I'll see you around, Kal'Shayar."

With that, she turned and walked away, heading back towards the main building. Kal'Shayar watched her leave with a thoughtful look on his face, glad that he might actually be able to make some friends during his stay here. Now in a considerably better mood than he had been earlier, he headed into the barracks and started to unpack the few belongings he had brought with him.

## 9. Sins of the Son

\*\*Sins of the Son\*\*

January 19th, 2558

Evening had fallen, the sky had turned dark and the sun had since descended beyond the horizon. Activity at the Pike's Creek military base had died down while the main cafeteria became crowded as dinner was served. Over in the administration building, General Caine stood by the window in his office, looking out across the compound. Lights shone through the windows in many of the buildings scattered out before him and there were several people out and about, including a small squad of soldiers who were running laps around the parade ground. It was a fine evening, though the sky above was overcast, indicating that rain was well on its way. The weather here was much like that of Earth, with the year split into seasons. It was the middle of winter here, so the rains were not unexpected.

Caine had already been to dinner. He and the other officers had their own dining room on the ground floor of the administration building where they could get somewhat more sophisticated meals. He had just come back from that very room, having spoken thoroughly with the Sangheili Major. The Sangheili were a fascinating species in Caine's opinion and Jerashar had been quite willing to talk about his people, lacking many of the vices older Sangheili might have had in regards to the human race. Caine had found the conversation very enlightening, though he could detect some doubt in Jerashar in regards to their mission. He did not see the terrorists as a big threat and was probably more concerned about the wellbeing of his own people, as their home-world was currently in a fair deal of strife. According to what Jerashar had told him, there were a lot of supporters for the Covenant loyalists and they had a great deal of power, with many of the neutral factions opting to follow those who carried the most power. It was an unfortunate state of affairs, with entire colonies divided between the loyalists and the reformists. It was surprising then that the Sangheili had cared enough to send over Jerashar and it was likely the young warrior thought he might have been wasting his abilities on such a trivial mission.

There were other things on Caine's mind though, particularly in regards to the reports he had just received. He had learned a bit more about the terrorists, as well as having gone through the records of all the Kig-Yar who had been sent here. He had reason to believe that these terrorists had informants within the UNSC, something that struck him as very hard to believe but nonetheless the reports had confirmed it. He considered bringing the team together to reveal this fact but decided against it, as there was little they could do in regards to it. He just needed to arrange some stricter security measures in regards to this operation.

There was, however, a few things he had discovered that had not only aroused his curiosity but also made him question the nature of the operation. In that measure, he had called Kal'Shayar to meet him in order to clear some things up. He had been through the Skirmisher's record rather thoroughly: Kal'Shayar had been through many battles, against humans as well as Covenant heretics. It was a record that, if Kal'Shayar had been human, he would probably be a General by now considering his achievements. However, according to the records, Kal'Shayar had been through some unfortunate personal problems that had lead to him falling out of military life. He had not been in combat for several years and was probably appropriately "rusty" when it came to his skills in that regard.

It was a tranquil night, looking out of the window now. Things were quiet, save for the occasional rumble of a passing vehicle. Some people would be turning in by now, save for the night staff who would only just be starting their shifts. Things were fairly routine here, something that only made Caine bored, another result of being out of the field ever since becoming a General. At least with this new team he might be able to get back into the action again, as dangerous as it might have been. The danger was all part of the job, he thought, and it was what made this line of work interesting.

He had thought he might have had a problem working with aliens, but it appeared he was not at all put-off by it. They were just like humans, in some regards. They may have evolved on different planets with vastly different appearances, but they still had the same basic values. The Sangheili and Kig-Yar valued friends and family, as well as loyalty to one's commander(s). Humans were the same. It did provide grounds for cooperation and cultural exchange that may benefit all the races involved. Caine wondered what the future of the current peace might hold, if it remained a peace. Perhaps in one hundred years these species would be living on the same planets, coexisting. It would take a long time for the scars left by the war to fade, but that was to be expected. This joint operation may be the beginning of something very beneficial.

At that moment, there was a ringing at the office door as someone on the other side sounded the buzzer. It completely derailed the General's train of thought.

"Come." Caine turned around as he said this, watching as the door opened and Kal'Shayar walked in. He was dressed in his orange set of armour, sans helmet, his yellow eyes scanning the interior of the office carefully.

Caine was somewhat familiar with the "Skirmisher" sub-species of Kig-Yar and had read reports on them. They had been deployed against the humans through most of the war, used as highly mobile shock troops and ranged infantry. It was not until after the battle of Reach that they disappeared from the fight, their numbers dwindling because of excessive casualties. Perhaps that indicated their rather obsolete nature, capable of serving as close combat fighters in an era where wars were often fought over vast distances? They had hearing and vision as sensitive as that of an ordinary Kig-Yar, but were able to close the distance on their foes quickly. They often carried personal shields, using their extreme agility to literally run circles around their opponents. However, they went down as easy as any ordinary human, with a single bullet in the chest enough to

punch through their armour and kill them. It was no wonder the Covenant had disbanded them in the later stages of the war, instead choosing to deploy the more common Jackals in ranged and defensive roles, using more specialized aliens as shock troopers.

Kal'Shayar was over six feet tall and surprisingly well-built for a Kig-Yar. He stood in front of Caine's desk, watching the human carefully. Caine detected a sense of uncertainty, obviously a result of not knowing why he had been called into the office. There was one thing Caine was concerned about, but had been pondering whether it was best for the Skirmisher to be notified about it.

"You can sit down, if you want," Caine said, gesturing to one of the two empty chairs that were in front of his desk. Kal'Shayar looked at them and slowly settled into one, fitting snugly into it. Having an alien casually sitting in his office certainly seemed novel and very out of the ordinary.

"You wished to see me, General?" Kal'Shayar had a very good grasp of the English language and used it rather formally, probably the result of a good education and upbringing. That other Kig-Yar, Javal, seemed far less sophisticated and had so far managed to get into a fight with one of the marines stationed on base. It had been broken up before either of them could cause serious harm to the other.

"Yes," Caine said, pulling out his chair and sitting down in it, looking towards Kal'Shayar. "I've been going through some reports. Heck, going through reports seems to be all I do here." He smiled but his slight joke seemed lost on the alien, who just raised a brow ridge and said nothing.

"I've gone through your record," Caine said. He had the record in question displayed on a data-pad that lay on the desk, one that he picked up as he spoke and started flicking through in order to jog his memory about certain points on it. "It was kindly supplied by your superiors. I have to say, if you were human, you'd have won an awful lot of awards by now."

"Perhaps you humans give awards too freely?" Kal'Shayar asked, tilting his head slightly in an inquisitive manner.

"Maybe." Caine smiled again. At least Kal'Shayar had some semblance of a sense of humour, something that had been missing from the other alien guests. "Your rank...it's 'Champion' and 'Commander'?"

"The rank of 'Champion' is the highest ground soldier rank for my race," Kal'Shayar explained. "As for 'Commander', that was bestowed upon me for this mission. It is not a proper Kig-Yar rank, but it is official. It gives me control of the entire Kig-Yar squad that has been sent here. Javal is my second-in-command, with the rank of 'Major'."

"Right," Caine said, nodding in understanding. "Is it alright if I call you 'Kal'?"

Kal'Shayar nodded.

"You can, if you wish," Kal'Shayar said.

"Alright, Kal, you seem friendly enough," Caine said, putting the

data-pad down. He felt that he could relax in the presence of this alien as he picked up some friendly vibes from him. Sure, there would always be that uncertainty with both of them, when speaking with a member of a different species, but nonetheless Caine got the impression that Kal'Shayar would be fairly easy to work with.

"I can't say the same for your colleague, Javal," Caine continued. "He seems a bit apprehensive. I get the impression he doesn't like humans."

"I have only known him for a short time, but from what I gather he has a strong distrust of your kind," Kal'Shayar said. "He also does not like me, stemming from the fact I took over his command. As you may know, I was a last minute addition to the team. I would not have received the position if Jerashar and I were not good friends."

"Yes, I read about that in the reports," Caine said. "You and Jerashar fought together in the war. You fought here, on Reach. Does being back here bring back memories?"

"It would be strange if it did not," Kal'Shayar said. "But I do not recognize the region. Perhaps, if I were to go to one of the places I had fought at, it may stir up vivid recollections of the battles that took place on this world. As for this place, Pike's Creek, as you humans call it, it reminds me of home. However, home is somewhat warmer."

"You're from the planet 'Sauem', right?"

"It is a colony, settled by my race centuries ago," Kal'Shayar replied. "We were a space-faring species long before many others, but our absorption into the Covenant stagnated much of our technological advancement. My ancestors were forced to adhere to the rules laid down by the Covenant governing body, and that included forbidding manipulation of Forerunner technology as that would be considered sacrilege. There was much of that technology on the worlds colonized by my race, but we were only permitted to worship it, not reverse-engineer it."

"And now that the Covenant are gone, you can finally get back on track with your progress," Caine said, finding himself fascinated by the story. In another reality, perhaps humanity had been forced into the Covenant rather than become the 'bad guys' in a holy war. The Kig-Yar had been forced into it and their space-faring empire had stagnated as a result. If it were not for the Covenant, the Kig-Yar could have advanced greatly and become an even more powerful race.

"I want to know if you'll have any issues with fighting members of your own species," Caine said. "Many of the terrorists are Kig-Yar, and I need to know if this might impair your performance out on the field."

Kal'Shayar gave this some thought, but did not seem too concerned. Rather, he looked quite confident which also put Caine at ease somewhat.

"I have no problem with killing those who threaten to upset the peace," Kal'Shayar said. "They are nothing but criminals and must be

brought to justice before they can cause any serious damage. You do not need to worry about my performance 'out on the field', as you said. I will fight to the best of my abilities and help you, and the rest of the team, in any way I can."

"Glad to hear it," Caine said with a grin.

"You may wish to speak to Javal about this," Kal'Shayar said. "He may feel differently."

"I'll keep that in mind."

There was a pause. Caine contemplated notifying Kal'Shayar of the recent information he had acquired concerning the terrorists, particularly the one thing that might give the Skirmisher a slightly different outlook on the whole situation. He decided against it: Kal'Shayar did not need to know about the potential traitors in their midst, nor did he need to know of the one particular alien terrorist that might get in the way of his mission. It was better he did not know any of this, as it would only impair his judgement while out on the field. Caine was not concerned, he was sure the team was secure save for his doubts about Javal.

"You know, I think you and I will get along very well," Caine said with a friendly smile forming at his lips. "We think along much the same lines. We're both commanders and experts in our fields. I'm surprised you're not in charge of the team, instead of Jerashar."

"As you probably know, I have not been an official member of the military for several years."

"Yes, but perhaps had you remained in the military..."

"I had other, more urgent matters to attend to," Kal'Shayar said sullenly. Caine knew about his deceased family from the reports. He was not sure whether to show sympathy or not toward the alien, as he had no idea whether Kig-Yar found that to be either condescending or honourable.

"I trust your lack of combat experience in the last several years won't impair your performance?" It was a legitimate question, but Caine got the impression that Kal'Shayar would have no problem getting back into the thick of things.

"My skills are still sharp," Kal'Shayar answered, slightly bearing his teeth in some kind of Skirmisher smile, "So that is another thing you do not need to concern yourself with, General. Is there anything else you wish to ask me?"

Caine thought about this for a moment before shaking his head.

"No, not right now," he said. "It was good talking to you, Kal."

Kal'Shayar rose out of his seat, gave a slight bow and turned around, walking out of the office. Caine sat back in his seat, feeling a bit more confident in the team's abilities and trustworthiness. Even so, he picked up the data-pad from his desk, watching as Kal'Shayar left before opening one of the more worrisome files contained on the

data-pad. It was a personnel file transmitted from some Kig-Yar source that Colonel Green had gotten in contact with, paying them with platinum (as such a metal was apparently in strong demand around the Kig-Yar space empire).

The file was about a Skirmisher named Lev'Kanar who had apparently become an important figure in terrorist circles. The Skirmisher pictured on the file bore a striking resemblance to Kal'Shayar, right down to the eyes and shape of the snout. Then there was the scar down the left side of his face and the information that started from underneath the image: Lev'Kanar of the Shae clan, son of Kal'Shayar and Mavil'Yar, former shock trooper. Wanted insurgent, privateer, terrorist.

"Looks like that boy of yours has been very naughty, Kal," Caine muttered to himself, skimming through the information contained in the file. Kal'Shayar did not need to know, he was better off remaining oblivious to the fact his own son was a terrorist. Maybe he might shoot the young Skirmisher from a distance and be none the wiser? If Lev'Kanar's record was anything to go by, then Kal'Shayar had more or less disowned his son. That made sense, considering all the crimes he had been charged with. And then there was the matter of an incident described in the file, occurring early in 2555, that had truly sent the notorious Skirmisher off the rails.

"Privateer, pirate, terrorist, arms smuggler and arsonist? Five attempted assassinations of Kig-Yar governors? If my son had been like that, I'd have shot him myself." Caine put the data-pad down, shaking his head. Revealing all of this to Kal'Shayar would only complicate matters, but that was no reason for the General to not look into it some more. There was a good chance that Kal'Shayar knew about this already, but if he did he did not mention it. He probably did not wish to talk about it.

\* \* \*

><p>Kal'Shayar had a good impression of the human General, thinking that they may have had more in common than he had originally thought. Being on Reach and surrounded by humans was a strange experience, but it was also a welcome relief, as he was no longer surrounded by the familiar forests of Sauem and constantly reminded of how he had lived, how he had been close to becoming a recluse. This mission gave him purpose again, even if it meant working with humans. Getting to know some of them, he found that they were not quite different to his own people, save for the obvious physical differences.<p>

He made his way out of the administration building, ready to relax for the remainder of the evening. The beds in the barracks he had been assigned to were fairly ordinary and much unlike the more "nest"-style ones he was used to on his home-world. He had already had something to eat, as one of the human cooks had brought some food over to the barracks for the Kig-Yar squad. He had called it "chicken" and it had been surprisingly good.

Feeling thirsty, Kal'Shayar made his way to the main mess hall. By this time, the dinner rush was over and people were filing out, heading off to their assigned quarters. He was somewhat grateful, as being the only Kig-Yar in a room crowded with humans would certainly have been awkward. The mess hall was quite large, forming a rectangular building a short distance from the main administration

one. There was a kitchen at the far end with a counter out its front, where the resident cooks served out the food, usually providing some choice but adhering to a daily menu that was changed now and then for variety. There were not too many people in here now, with some groups of human personnel scattered about but otherwise the atmosphere within the well-lit building was muted.

Kal'Shayar made his way across the hall and towards one of the refrigerators positioned by the counter. It had a transparent glass front, allowing him to see the variety of beverages on display. He was unfamiliar with just about all of them, save for water which was not at all hard to identify. He pulled open the refrigerator and took out one of the water bottles, unscrewing the lid and gulping down about half before he started to leave. He was surprised when he saw Commander McGillon sitting at a table in his peripheral vision, alone and eating from a plate of salad. She saw him and gestured to him to join her, something that caught the Skirmisher by surprise but nonetheless he approached.

"Hello, Kal," she said. It seemed everyone had started calling him by the shortened variant of his name. He had no problem with it, although he sometimes got the impression that some humans simply did not remember his full name. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted a drink, preferably something cold and not straight out of a tap," he said. He looked around, noticing that some of the other humans were looking at him, a few of them speaking to those sitting with them, obviously talking about the alien in the mess hall.

"What do you know? People are staring." Elise looked unimpressed. "Huh. Doesn't bother me. What about you? Do you feel uncomfortable?"

"I would be lying if I said I did not," Kal'Shayar said. "However, that uncomfortable feeling is not as pronounced as it was earlier. It is all too easy to remain with my own people in the barracks, but I would rather mingle, especially with those I may end up fighting along-side." He looked at her, giving the Skirmisher equivalent of a smile. It was an awkward one at that, as he was not sure how Elise would interpret the expression. On the other hand, humans were surprisingly easy to read. Their faces were able to create some rather odd expressions, their muscles contorting in all manner of shapes. Their scents were also easy to decipher and right now he could sense that Elise was relaxed, the smell of her food quite prominent.

"You should sit down," Elise said, nodding towards the vacant chair across from her. Kal'Shayar did just that, pulling out the chair with his free-hand and sitting upon it. He placed his bottle of water on the table, doing a quick look around at the other people in the hall. They were talking about him now, this much was obvious. It was also difficult to block out all the different and unfamiliar scents. His eyes were beginning to water, but he guessed it was just something he would have to get used to.

"Made any friends here?" Elise asked, curious.

"I am not certain," Kal'Shayar answered. "I think I may be getting along well with the General, but he has his eccentricities. He asked me several questions about my past, what I did in the war and why I

have been out of the military for so long."

"I think he's just curious," Elise said.

"Are you?"

"Sure. Why wouldn't I be?" She paused, relaxing back in her chair. "I have a rare opportunity. I'll be working with an alien, one from a species we were at war with six years ago, so you're damn right I'm curious. You told me earlier that you were open to questions."

Kal'Shayar found Elise's confidence admirable, given the circumstances. No other human, save for the General, had been this comfortable talking to him.

"What's your home-world like?" Elise asked.

"I am from a colony world called 'Sauem'," Kal'Shayar said. "It has a mostly tropical climate, but there are more temperate mountain regions closer to the planet's poles. I lived there most of my life and raised my family there. It is a beautiful world, untouched by the ravages of war."

"A family?" Elise raised an eyebrow. "You have a family?"

Kal'Shayar nodded, but was unable to stop himself from looking sullen.

"I had a family," Kal'Shayar said. "My mate died of a rare illness several years ago, and my daughter recently perished from the same disease. As for my son..." He paused, shaking his head. "I do not know what has become of him. He chose a life of crime, committing acts of piracy. I no longer consider him my son. For all intents and purposes, he is dead as well."

Elise looked surprised as she listened to all of this.

"Wow. I'm sorry to hear that. If it means anything, you have my sympathies."

"I do not require them," Kal'Shayar said. "I have mourned their deaths and remember them fondly. Now, I prefer to focus on the future and move on."

"Very well." It was clear Elise had not been expecting to hear such a sobering story and seemed taken aback, remaining silent for a while. Kal'Shayar picked up his bottle of water and unscrewed the lid again, gulping down what was left inside. With that done, he put the empty bottle on the table, watching Elise with some concern. Obviously she was at a loss on what else to say, the mood ruined by Kal'Shayar mentioning the more depressing recent events of his life.

"What of Earth?" Kal'Shayar asked her, deciding to break the uneasy silence that had fallen between them. "What is that world like?"

"You haven't been there?" Elise asked, narrowing her gaze.

"No. After the battle here, on Reach, I returned home. I never was

with the expeditionary force that attacked your home-world."

Elise nodded, giving her response some thought.

"Well, Earth is a lot like Reach in a lot of aspects," she said. "There's all sorts of places: oceans, deserts, rainforests, mountains and so on. It's also got some very large and very crowded cities. Some of those cities got devastated during the war, but most of them survived relatively intact. I grew up in a place on a southern continent called 'Melbourne'. It's a more temperate region, gets both hot and cold. I haven't been there for years, though. I prefer it out here, in space. I've served on a few different ships, but recently I've been put into more advisory/supervisory roles." She sighed, a disappointed look appearing on her face.

"Why? Do your superiors doubt your combat abilities?" Kal'Shayar asked, genuinely curious. He got the impression from Elise that she was very capable at what she did for a living and that her 'supervisory' role in the team seemed beneath her. Her confidence was probably enough to convince him that she at least thought she was capable of anything.

"I've been in trouble a few too many times with the people above me," Elise said. "I'd probably be a Captain now if it wasn't for my conduct. I've questioned orders and disobeyed them a few times. Sometimes I disagree with what my superiors tell me. That probably makes me a bad soldier, but sometimes you've got to make a stand against bad orders. That includes not firing on unarmed civilians, for instance."

Kal'Shayar nodded. He had never been one to fire on unarmed targets, though the same could not be said for other Kig-Yar. Compound this with the fact some of his fellow soldiers had actually eaten their victims and sometimes he doubted whether or not his race was civilized enough to even be a galactic power.

"I'm only on this team because the General trusts in my abilities," Elise continued. "He even told me he needs someone on the team who won't just blindly follow orders, someone willing to think them through and even question them if need be. He thinks there's a benefit to having a more independent officer. Maybe he's right. Not many other people in his position would think that way."

"You said earlier you had missed out on the war?"

Elise shook her head. She even seemed disappointed to admit it, though Kal'Shayar was slightly envious of her. His experiences in the war were mostly the sort he would have preferred to forget.

"I was stationed on a destroyer that served as a defence force for one of our Inner Colonies," Elise said. "We missed out on much of the fighting. When the Covenant broke through to Earth, they bypassed the colony completely. You could say I'm one of the lucky ones, but since then I've been ordered to fight insurgents on the Outer Colonies and that usually involves fighting people who have next to no chance of fighting back successfully. It's nowhere near as noble as fighting to defend your race from extinction."

"War in itself is never noble," Kal'Shayar said, "However, the actions of those who fight it can be."

There was a pause. They had been both shaped by the war in different ways. Elise had wanted to fight in it but missed the chance, whereas Kal'Shayar had fought in it but wished he had not.

"It's even more messed up when you realize that the whole war was fought for nothing," Elise said, breaking the silence. "It was caused by lies propagated by the Prophets. Thing is, since I lack proper combat experience, few of my superiors actually think I have what it takes to become a Captain. My actions fighting insurgents haven't helped my case much."

"You seem quite capable, Commander," Kal'Shayar said. "You remind me of some of the female soldiers I have known, particularly those who rise through the ranks quickly. The way you carry yourself speaks volumes."

"Well...thanks, I guess." Elise smirked, unsure of what to think of this alien. He had practically complimented her, though Kal'Shayar was not sure how she had taken it. He had only known her for a few hours, but nonetheless he felt that she could actually become a friend.

"You invited me to sit here with you," Kal'Shayar said. "Why?"

"You looked like you needed a friend," Elise replied.

Kal'Shayar had a severe lack of friends, especially on this planet. Most of the Kig-Yar in his squad did not like him, probably influenced by Javal. He seemed like a rather persuasive type that all of the others would follow. Considering Kal'Shayar had been given command of the squad at the last minute, it was almost understandable why hardly anyone in that squad liked him. The one female in the squad who had a clear want of him was not one he found particularly likeable and a conversation with her earlier had revealed that she was merely interested in the fact that he was a full-blooded Skirmisher, not because she actually liked him for who he was. Conceiving children with a Skirmisher from a well-regarded bloodline would help her social standing considerably. Kal'Shayar had no desire to be used like that.

"I'm curious about you Skirmishers," Elise said. "I mean, why are you so different to the other Kig-Yar?"

"It comes from a slightly different path of evolution," Kal'Shayar said, his train of thought broken. He did not mind: thinking about the people in his squad simply frustrated him, as it was clear they would prove troublesome to lead. "My people spent thousands of years living in more mountainous, less hospitable regions. We became physically larger and stronger than the common Kig-Yar. That explains our physical differences, as the environment we lived in required us to be hardier."

"Are there many Skirmishers?" She asked.

"Not anymore. Generations of cross-breeding has caused our genes to become less common, and our numbers dwindle as a result of the war."

"So, eventually you guys might be wiped out?" Elise shook her head,

looking taken aback. "That's awful."

"It is the unfortunate reality," Kal'Shayar said. He leaned back in his chair, pondering the thought. He had since accepted this truth, as harsh as it was. "We are easily overlooked by our common Kig-Yar dominated governing bodies. Not many commoners are interested in Skirmisher problems. We have as many rights as they do, but there are far less of us and thus we have far less influence over what our society becomes."

"Maybe you Skirmishers should colonize a planet of your own?"

"It is an option that has been considered, but none have actually acted upon it," Kal'Shayar explained. "Maybe one day it will happen, but not for some time."

Elise shook her head.

"You know, I think I've learned a lot just by talking to you," she said. "I wouldn't mind paying a visit to Sauem one day, just to see what you described. Maybe tourism to alien worlds might become popular in the near future."

Kal'Shayar was not sure what she meant by 'tourism' but she seemed honest in her suggestion to visit his home planet. If anything, she was genuine in her interest about his species. He was certainly interested in learning more about humans.

"There's still a couple more hours before I have to turn in," Elise said. "How about you tell me more about your race? I could tell you about mine, in exchange. Does that sound fair?"

Kal'Shayar smiled again.

"I would not mind that," he said, feeling genuinely happy for the first time in a long while. "What would you like to know?"

## 10. Raid

\*\*Raid\*\*

January 20th, 2558

General Caine had spent much of last night piecing together information he had received through several reports from different sources, hoping to unlock the truth behind a particular aspect that he felt would have some impact on the mission. It had not been too difficult for him to go back through the records of Lev'Kanar, the Skirmisher that was practically at the top of the terrorist organization, piecing together his other appearances and learning much about him. It was like a puzzle and Caine had always liked that sort of thing, as he believed that it gave the brain a good workout.

It was not worth complicating matters by letting Kal'Shayar know his son was alive and well and stirring up trouble on frontier worlds. Instead, Caine had taken it upon himself to find out the whole story, curious to find one of the major players was right here on the base: Sergeant Valerie Nevas. She had been a more recent transfer here and

had been suggested to him to be a member of the team, quite capable of leading a squad of marines. Her paperwork had come through suddenly when she had been transferred, as if the whole thing had been organized on short notice. Caine was not too concerned about this and was more curious about what role she had played in the younger Skirmisher's past.

There were reports from a variety of sources, ranging from ONI documents to Kig-Yar government records. Lev'Kanar had made a name for himself as a pirate and smuggler, moving Covenant weapons through human, Sangheili and Kig-Yar space and selling them for a variety of things, from rare metal elements to hiring more mercenaries. If these sources were anything to go by, Lev'Kanar had acquired quite the following, most of these followers being Kig-Yar and many of them being ex-soldiers. Caine had uncovered a few differing reports concerning an attack on one of the Skirmisher's hideouts five years previously, where Lev'Kanar had apparently 'died', only to turn up again in recent months. There were conflicting viewpoints on these reports, with one of them being written by Sergeant Nevas herself.

Caine had called the Sergeant to his office. She would be on her way by now, being more or less in good shape despite having spent the last six months in hospital after suffering through an incendiary grenade explosion, a consequence of taking on insurgents on an Outer Colony world. Reconstructive procedures were very sophisticated in this day and age, so Nevas would be looking relatively intact despite the burns she had received many months before, with only minor scarring here and there left by the surgery. Caine sat back in the chair at his desk, awaiting the arrival of the Sergeant, having perused her detailed report. Even so, he wanted to hear it from the mouth of the Sergeant herself, as reports often lacked feeling behind their words, being written in a very dry, expository style.

As for the mission, the UNSC destroyer Vanguard had arrived in orbit. The team would be leaving for Paradise Falls soon, though this gave them all a few hours of time remaining on Reach. Caine was considering going on the trip himself, leaving one of his subordinates in charge here. He had the fine excuse of wanting to oversee the operation himself and it would probably be all the excuse he needed. He had not been off of Reach for a few years now and the prospect of going on what one might call an "adventure" was too good to pass up, in his eyes anyway. He had even packed a case of spare clothing and a few personal effects, but was still waiting for his second-in-command here to get back to him on the matter of running the base while he was away. The trip to Paradise Falls would take well over a week in slip-space and that was using the more advanced slip-space drives that had been constructed as a result of reverse-engineering Covenant and Forerunner technology. If anything, humanity had not wasted any time ensuring it got a technological edge over its rivals within the galaxy.

Caine got the impression, going through the reports Colonel Green had forwarded to him, that they were on the tip of something far greater. Terrorists were one thing, but there was something about Lev'Kanar's actions that implied he was working towards something far more than mere terrorism. There was no way of knowing what exactly, nor if he was the leader of the terrorist group itself, but there was no doubt that he was a major player in it. Kal'Shayar did not need to know this, nor did the rest of the team. Right now it was still mostly

supposition as to his involvement in the matter concerning the stolen AI, so Caine did not wish to put the team after someone who might not even have a direct involvement. Telling Kal'Shayar his son was a terrorist would probably complicate matters even further. From what he could gather, Kal'Shayar was aware that his son was involved in some criminal activities anyway.

Oddly enough, he liked the Skirmisher. Kal'Shayar seemed a reasonable sort for a Kig-Yar, acting more civilized than some of the others Caine had encountered. They were both veterans of bloody wars and experienced soldiers and had even been on opposing sides for a time. Even so, there was no getting past the fact that Kal'Shayar was an alien from a very different culture. It always felt a bit odd, talking with an alien, as the whole thing had an almost surreal-like quality to it. The war had gone on for far too long, so forming any friendships with aliens would probably take some doing considering the animosity that still existed between the species.

There was the familiar ring at the door of the office, causing the General to look up, his train of thought broken.

"Come." He watched as the door opened and Valerie Nevas, dressed in a grey and blue Marines uniform, walked in. Her dark hair was of moderate length, some scarring visible at the side of her neck. Her bright blue eyes scanned the room eagerly. She seemed a bit uneasy, as being called to the General's office was probably something she had not been expecting. The door slid shut behind her and the Sergeant stepped inside, standing to and saluting.

"Reporting as ordered, sir," she said.

"Take a seat," Caine said, gesturing to one of the vacant seats in front of his desk. Valerie relaxed and dropped the salute, sitting down in the vacant chair and directing her gaze towards the General.

"You don't need to look so nervous," Caine said reassuringly. "You're not in trouble. I just want to talk to you about something." He brought up her record on his computer terminal, skimming through the details. Sergeant Nevas sat in her chair quite still, relaxing noticeably when it was clear she was not here to be chewed out for anything she might have done wrong.

"You have quite a record," Caine said, shifting his gaze back towards her. "You fought in the war, was on the ground in East Africa when the Covenant landed in Mombasa. You've been through a lot. You have the scars to show it."

"Don't remind me, sir," Nevas said, shaking her head. "I was lucky to survive that explosion."

"That's another thing: many have commented on your 'luck', according to your record. You've survived things most others wouldn't have."

Nevas frowned, but was silent. She clearly did not like being reminded of past wounds, particularly the ones that had left her disfigured for months.

"I'm curious about one mission in particular," Caine said. "The one

to Noya IV. You do remember that one, don't you?"

Nevas looked at him, raising an eyebrow. She was clearly surprised to hear that planet mentioned. Caine had looked up the planet through curiosity: it was the fourth planet in the Noya system (that much had been obvious), a system that sat on the edge of UNSC-chartered space, a region that had been claimed by the Kig-Yar. The name 'Noya' apparently stemmed from a Kig-Yar word, meaning 'tranquillity'. The planet was a 'terran' class world, much like Earth though it had far more thick jungle regions.

"You want to know about that mess-up?" She asked. "Haven't you got the reports?"

"I've been through them. But I want to hear what happened, straight from the mouth of someone who was there. As I understand, it was the first mission in Operation Devil Hammer." Unlike most military operations, Caine had chosen not to give the new team an official name in the style of 'Devil Hammer'. He personally hated names like that, as they often trivialized the missions contained within the operation in question. Even so, that did not stop other higher-ups from labelling military operations with peculiar names.

"Devil Hammer? Shit, I remember that, sir," Nevas said disapprovingly, shaking her head. "Nothing went right in that one."

"I want to hear about the mission to Noya IV," Caine said, leaning forwards slightly from where he sat, curious. "Reports can only say so much."

Nevas paused, thinking about this for a moment.

"My memory is a bit patchy in places," she said, "But if you really want to hear about what happened, I suppose I can try to piece things together."

\* \* \*

><p><span>August 27th, 2553<span>

There had been a storm only the night before, leaving the ground muddy and the air thick with the smell of moisture. Exotic alien birds called from the jungle that ran around the perimeter of the compound and the sound of alien ground vehicles, transports that hovered on pulsating blue lights, echoed throughout the valley. The skies of Noya IV were blue, with the once overcast skies clearing up, leaving thin wispy clouds that splayed out across the blue above. Corporal Valerie Nevas was one of six marines camped out on a ridge overlooking the compound, with the squad leader, a grey-haired and well-built Sergeant Major by the name of Charles Okama, used a set of binoculars to survey the compound. He was tall, towering over Valerie, middle-aged with weathered features and bushy eyebrows. He had a cap on, his uniform short-sleeved and lacking the armour plating the other marines were wearing. There was an M6 pistol in a holster at his waist, a customized variant that had a chrome finish. Lowering the binoculars, Okama looked over to the Kig-Yar standing a short distance away.

The Kig-Yar in question was named Kelak, an opportunist if there ever

was one. Kelak had revealed to the UNSC the existence of several Covenant military bases scattered across the frontier in exchange for assistance in overthrowing the Covenant-influenced governing body on his home-world. Relations with his species were still tumultuous, but they had at the very least accepted the falsehoods of the Covenant religion without as much upheaval as the Sangheili had gone through. They wanted to be friends with humanity, probably through fear of how powerful they still were even after the war while the destruction of the Covenant had left his species at a very noticeable disadvantage. There were still Covenant loyalists oppressing the colony world he was from, backed up by Sangheili warriors. Kelak was also not adverse to accepting material items as payment either, including weapons to help arm the people on his home colony in order to overthrow the oppressive regime. Loyalists would continue being a problem for years, this much was clear.

"That don't look like a Covenant base to me," Okama said, putting away his binoculars. He eyed the Kig-Yar with a doubtful gaze. "They've got some sort of estate set up amongst those old ruins. I see crates of weapons on those trucks, but there are only Jackals and none are in Covenant armour. You better not be fucking us around, bird-man."

"I assure you, Sergeant Major," Kelak said, his voice raspy, "This place has been used as a hub for arms smuggling, supplying not only Covenant loyalists but rebels as well. The people who run this operation are profiting by playing both sides against the middle."

Okama frowned. He put a finger to the radio ear-piece in his left ear.

"Bravo Team, this is the boss. You're cleared to move in. Hostiles are heavily armed, so shoot to kill. Don't take any chances. If possible, seize as many of the weapon shipments as possible." They had a large squad of marines on stand-by, hiding in the jungle around the estate.

The compound consisted of a set of brown-stone ruins, overgrown with vines and weeds. A large set of metal and wooden structures had been built amongst the ruins, with the main building being a three storey tall 'estate'. There were Covenant-built transport vehicles parked out the front, with purple metal crates stacked in a yard to the estate's side. There were Kig-Yar in mostly rag-tag jungle-coloured outfits moving crates around and otherwise patrolling the compound. They were all armed, mostly with Covenant weapons, but they did not look like an official Covenant force.

"So, we take this place out and we cut-off a weapon supply line?" Okama nodded approvingly, but did not smile. Valerie had never seen him smile. "I suppose that's worthwhile. What do you think, Corporal?" He looked expectantly at her, waiting for an answer.

"I think it's worthwhile too, sir," she said after a pause, as the question took a moment to register in her head.

"Very good. We'll move in once Bravo Team starts the fireworks."

\* \* \*

><p>Inside the estate, the atmosphere was a calm one. No one there knew of the trouble that would start once the humans marched into view, brandishing weapons. Instead, Lev'Kanar had only just awoken, beads of sweat running down his dark skin, the sheets of the nest-shaped bedding having since been kicked well away from him during sleep. As usual, his mate had woken up far earlier, leaving him alone in the bed. Sun streamed through the open shutters on the windows, causing him to close his eyes momentarily as they adjusted. Rising out of the bed, he glimpsed himself in the mirror at the wall: he was reminded of his father every time he looked at himself, as the resemblance was very prominent. He cared little for the family he had left back on Sauem and instead was far more concerned with the one he had developed here on Noya IV, as he had three children, each three years old, to look after. His mate, Ve'lae, had been someone whom he had chanced upon meeting during his time in the military. Their children had been somewhat 'accidental', although he sometimes thought that Ve'lae had let it happen if only so they would end up together. Now they worked on Noya in a very profitable arms smuggling business, selling weapons to whoever was willing to pay highest. Sometimes that meant selling them to both sides, Covenant loyalists and Kig-Yar reformists alike.</p>

Kig-Yar children developed fairly quickly and his three three-year olds were already capable of walking, though their language skills were still lacking. His son, the one who bore a rather striking resemblance to him save for the eyes, (which were blue like his mother's) came running into the room. He was somewhat tall for a three year old and a bit unsteady on his legs, but he was the one child that Lev'Kanar had very high hopes for.

Lev'Kanar quickly changed into his usual set of beige coloured robes, padded with armour plating. His son, Devnar, had started running around the room before finally bumping into his father's left leg, looking up with a worried expression. Lev'Kanar just smiled down at him, bending over to pick up the youngster.

"Where is your mother?" He asked.

Devnar pointed down, indicating that she was downstairs. Lev'Kanar slipped into a pair of well-worn boots that fit snugly on his clawed feet before heading out of the room and down the stairs. He had chosen to set up a home here on Noya IV, having liked the peaceful atmosphere of the world. The ancient ruins here added to this feeling, relics leftover by some civilization that had destroyed itself long ago, a constant reminder of the history of the world. One of his colleagues, a male Kig-Yar who spent his spare time studying history, had studied the ruins in question and theorized that the civilization had engaged in a nuclear war. The background radiation to prove this theory was there, but was nowhere near dangerous levels after so many thousands of years, certainly not in this region anyway. Such radiation in the upper atmosphere also scrambled orbital scans, ensuring no passing ship would be able to detect them very easily.

Downstairs, on the ground floor, was a large living area. His two daughters were here, sitting on the floor, playing with their toys. They seemed pleased to see their father out of bed and Lev'Kanar plonked his son down on one of the chairs, leaving him with his siblings while the Skirmisher went into an adjoining room. Ve'Lae was here, dressed in her usual set of casual blue robes, staring out of

the window in front of her, looking out across the compound. She turned around when she saw Lev'Kanar enter.

"You are awake far later than usual," Ve'Lae said.

"I had troubling dreams," Lev'Kanar replied, walking over to the tap at the far wall and switching it on, ducking his head down so he could lap up the water that poured out. After a moment, he switched off the tap, wiping away the water that dripped from his snout with one sleeve.

"A new shipment has arrived," Ve'Lae said, stepping towards him, slowly working an arm around him. Lev'Kanar would have been lying to himself if he thought their bonding was perfect. She liked him far more than he liked her, it was the children that he cared most about. "If we continue this, we shall be set for life. We could spend our entire lives living here. It is so peaceful."

"As appealing as that sounds," he said, stepping towards the window, removing himself from her grasp, "I do wish to explore the galaxy some more. It will be nowhere near as dangerous as it used to be, with the war being over. If you wish, you can remain here."

"Why would I not accompany you?" She asked, frowning. "Once the children are old enough, we can buy a ship of our own and leave, if that is what you wish."

Lev'Kanar only nodded in reply. Their conversation was interrupted by the distant rattle of kinetic weapons fire and shouting. Something exploded outside, sending a brief flash of light through the window as one of the transports blossomed into blue flame, smouldering metal fragments raining down. Immediately, Lev'Kanar grabbed Ve'Lae and ran into the living area. One of the guards from outside barged in through the front door as the sounds of fighting outside intensified.

"Humans! They're storming the compound!" The guard shouted.

Lev'Kanar looked to Ve'Lae, noticing the worried expression on her face. There was no time to waste, as it was clear that they had been found out. How the humans had discovered this hide-out was not important, as it was obvious they were here for one reason only.

"Take the children," Lev'Kanar said sternly, grabbing his mate by the sides and making her look him straight in the eyes.

"I can fight..." She began, but Lev'Kanar interrupted her.

"Take the children. They need you." Already the three kids had gathered around. One of them was mewling in distress and Ve'Lae grabbed her. Lev'Kanar picked up his son again and thrust her into his mate's arms. As much as he would have liked to go with them, he much preferred to fight. He had an entire operation set up here, a very successful one that had supplied him with the wealth necessary to come to this world and build his home. He was also determined to protect his family, despite what he felt for his mate.

"What about you? We can both leave." Ve'Lae looked angry, but it was

clear that she knew it was for the best that she escaped with the children.

"I will follow, but until then I will cover your escape," Lev'Kanar replied. He watched as Ve'Lae nodded while she carried their son in one arm and one of their daughters in the other. The other one held the back of her mother's robe as they hurried out of the room.

Once they were out of the room, Lev'Kanar turned to the guard. Outside, the sounds of fighting had gotten very close and the smell of smoke was thick in the air. Lev'Kanar walked over to a locked cabinet at the wall, keying in the appropriate code in order to unlock it. He pulled it open and revealed the Type-31 'needle' rifle contained within. Taking the weapon into his hands he loaded it quickly, being sure to shove a few spare magazines into the pockets in his outfit before turning around to face the guard again.

"Where are they attacking from?" He asked the guard.

"All directions," the guard replied. "They caught us completely by surprise. They were probably watching us for hours, mapping out our movements and determining our numbers."

Lev'Kanar started for the door but stopped in his tracks when automatic weapons fire erupted from somewhere outside, ripping through the wall around the flimsy wooden door. The guard was caught in the hail of bullets, twitching and convulsing from each impact, dark purple blood erupting as the rounds punched through his flesh. He fell to the floor, riddled with large bloody holes.

The Skirmisher backed away from the door, seeing through the windows that human marines had started to fight their way through the courtyard out the front. There was a loud crashing sound from his left and he turned around, watching as a pair of marines came running out of the other room, having come in through the window. Lev'Kanar raised his rifle and fired, the pink crystalline shards punching through the armour one of the marines was wearing. A few of them exploded, splattering dark red blood across the walls near them. Both marines fell, but this distraction had cost Lev'Kanar as someone was now behind him. He could hear them, their footfalls on the carpeted floor quite audible to his sensitive Kig-Yar hearing.

Lev'Kanar was about to snap around, but the person behind him delivered a rather painful blow to the back of his head with the butt-end of his weapon, causing the Skirmisher to stumble before falling into an unconscious daze.

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><p>Lev'Kanar awoke outside, lying in the mud while some distance away, smoke billowed from his burning house. The sounds of weapons fire continued from out in the distance, with the occasional explosion to top things off. Rising to his feet, Lev'Kanar found himself looking straight at Kelak, a common Kig-Yar and an old associate of his. Kelak grinned at him mischievously, holding an old fashioned Kig-Yar blade in one hand while the Type-31 needle rifle lay in the mud nearby, but well out of Lev'Kanar's reach.</p>

"The humans would have been very glad to get a hold of you," Kelak said. He twirled the knife around in his right hand while Lev'Kanar

simply looked him in the eyes, unimpressed. "But you would implicate me in this whole business and then the humans would know that I have been using them to eliminate my rivals, rather than actually help their fight against the loyalists. You have undercut me far too many times..."

>Lev'Kanar had heard enough and so brought his hands to Kelak's knife-wielding hand before trying to grab the blade, carrying this out in one quick and fluid motion. A grappling fight ensued as both Kig-Yar attempted to overpower each other, with Kelak gripping his blade tightly while Lev'Kanar attempted to wrestle it from his grip. Knowing Kelak, it was likely he had been hoping to personally gut his rival with that blade which was fortunate for Lev'Kanar, as that gave him an opportunity to fight back.<p>

Kelak moved the blade closer and closer to his face, one of its sharp edges scraping down the left side of the Skirmisher's face, narrowly missing his eye. It drew blood and left a gash, but the stinging pain was nothing compared to the rage building in Lev'Kanar as he lashed out with a powerful kick, hitting Kelak in the groin. He stumbled and lost his grip on the blade, grunting in pain. Lev'Kanar grabbed the knife and held it tightly in his right hand while he grabbed Kelak by the back of the neck with his free-hand. He brought the blade to the Kig-Yar's throat.

There was a look of terror in Kelak's eyes as he realized what was about to happen but Lev'Kanar did not allow him any reprieve. He sliced the blade across Kelak's throat, purple blood gushing out before he let go of the Kig-Yar and let him fall into the mud, choking on his own blood. Stowing the knife under his belt, Lev'Kanar stepped over to where his needle rifle lay and picked it up. He did not give his former rival any further thought as he focused on the scene of chaos ahead. The entire compound was filled with smoke as fires raged from burning vehicles, small arms fire being exchanged amongst the chaos as his guards fought against the human Marines.

Lev'Kanar began to run, his mind shifting to thoughts of his family. His three terrified children and Ve'Lae, who would be caught up in the middle of this attack. He remained silent, the rage building within him kept under tight control. There were marines ahead, three of them firing from the undergrowth at a few Kig-Yar guards who were pinned behind cover. Lev'Kanar ran up from behind them, stopping about ten metres away and opening fire with his needle rifle. He cut the three of them down within seconds, with one of them exploding when a few of the crystalline shards detonated in his back, erupting with pink flame and shearing his body into two, blood splattering across Lev'Kanar's front. Running by them without further thought, Lev'Kanar felt a sudden stinging pain that caused him to stumble momentarily, a bullet having caught him in the stomach, probably causing untold internal damage. The adrenaline surging through him was intense enough for the pain to be rather subdued and he swivelled around where he stood, locating the marine who had shot him before sending a pink needle rifle shard into the human's throat. The marine fell backwards as the explosion of the shard caused his head to fly clean off his shoulders.

There was shouting from the rear of the main building and Lev'Kanar immediately recognized the voice as belonging to Ve'Lae. Ignoring everything else, even as two of his guards were cut down by automatic rifle fire near him, he charged into the now burning house and

started on his way through to the back.

\* \* \*

><p>Valerie had been fighting her way through the Kig-Yar guards, keeping up with Sergeant Major Okama and a few of the other marines. The entire mission had turned ugly, as they had underestimated the hardiness of the Kig-Yar soldiers stationed here. A few poorly-placed grenades had started fires all around the compound, causing smoke to fill the air and obscure vision. Nonetheless, the squad had made their way through, taking a casualties in the process and losing track of Kelak, who had presumably run for safety. The main house was already on fire by this point but nonetheless they made their way inside, with Okama taking the lead, his pistol gripped tightly in his right hand as they worked their way through the smoke-filled corridors.</p>

A Kig-Yar jumped out of one of the doorways further down the corridor, opening fire with a plasma pistol. Green bolts of energy zipped by Valerie, with one hitting the marine on her right in the face, the searing bolt of energy burning through his skull and boiling most of his brain. He fell to the floor while Okama and Valerie returned fire, cutting the Kig-Yar down, dark purple blood splattering the wall behind it.

The group, now reduced to three, arrived at the end of the corridor. Part of the wall behind them fell in, flames erupting forth. A staircase ahead took them down into another wing of the house, so with little other choice they started down, making their way to what was undoubtedly a basement area.

Valerie felt a mixture of fear and excitement, a common occurrence for her in the middle of combat. She knew there was a very good chance she might get killed, but she knew it was best if she kept her wits about her and concentrated on the mission. There was a better chance of surviving this mess if she just kept focussed. Okama would have been sure to tell her that if he thought she looked too shaken up.

The basement dark and empty, mostly free of smoke and had numerous metal crates lined up along the wall. There was an open door at the far end that went through a brief tunnel that appeared to open out to the rear of the house. Okama approached this doorway, peering through it before signalling Valerie and the young Private with her to follow him. It was clearly some sort of escape tunnel taking them out to the open fields behind the house where a number of transports were parked. Valerie was first out, with Okama following closely behind. Three Kig-Yar guards were up ahead, while another one was making their way to one of the transports, followed by three smaller ones.

Okama opened fire on the three guards, bringing one down with a few well-placed shots from his pistol. Valerie hosed the others down with assault rifle fire, watching in her peripheral vision as the other Kig-Yar hurriedly packed into the vehicle. The vehicle was fairly well-armoured, somewhat larger than a Ghost and fully-enclosed, operating in much the same way as that Covenant scout-craft. With her training very much controlling her actions, she pulled a grenade from where it was clipped to her armour and yanked out its pin. Throwing it, the grenade landed close to the vehicle, detonating seconds later

with a deafeningly loud crash, the explosion tearing through the metal like paper and igniting the engine.

\* \* \*

><p>Lev'Kanar saw the whole thing as he came running up a short rise before arriving in the open field behind the house. There were three humans there, gunning down some more of his guards while Ve'Lae fled into one of the transports with the children. He was too slow to react when one of the humans, a female, threw a grenade towards the vehicle his family had climbed into, one that exploded in spectacular fashion and ignited the plasma that fuelled the transport.<p>

The entire vehicle exploded into a blue-white ball of flame, pieces of it flying everywhere, raining down upon the field, trailing blue flame and starting more fires. Lev'Kanar froze where he stood, the reality of what had just occurred taking a moment to sink in.

>"NO!"<p>

The rage that had been boiling up in him exploded and he snarled, running towards the human marines, raising his needle rifle. He opened fire, catching one of them in the side with his first few shots. One of the others, wielding a pistol, swivelled around quickly and fired at him, shooting him three times, each shot blasting through his torso and slowing him down, his strength draining away suddenly as he stumbled and fell to the ground. He lay there for a while, still conscious, watching the burning transport which was all that was left of the children he had loved so dearly. He could barely move, his rage instead pulsing through him with no means of releasing it. Unconsciousness came soon afterwards and it would be days before he found himself awake again.

\* \* \*

><p><span>January 20th, 2558<span>

Caine had sat listening to Sergeant Nevas' account of the mission while he skimmed reports from other sources that confirmed what he had been lead to believe: Lev'Kanar had lost his family during that raid and, oblivious to the Sergeant, she had unwittingly been the one to kill them. Lev'Kanar had been an arms smuggler to begin with, but now he had good reason to hate humans, particularly the UNSC. Caine considered telling her what he knew, having pieced it together from all the reports that Green had forwarded him concerning the matter, but decided against it.

"The Kig-Yar informant, Kelak, turned out to be an arms smuggler as well," Nevas said. "We found him dead, his throat slashed, not too far from the compound. I get the impression he had tricked us into attacking a rival of his, rather than a proper Covenant outpost."

>Caine nodded. The Kig-Yar were renowned for their sneaky, cunning nature. It seemed unsurprising that one of them had gone as far as to trick a human force of Marines into carrying out his dirty work and get paid for it.<p>

"Well, it corroborates with the reports I've read," Caine said, after a pause. "Operation Devil Hammer was considered a failure shortly afterwards, and I can see why. Little was achieved, other than

antagonizing alien criminal elements."

"Why did you want to know about all of this, sir?" Nevas asked, raising an inquisitive eyebrow.

"I was curious," Caine answered. This was true: ever since finding out Nevas had some kind of connection to Lev'Kanar, he had wanted to know the extent of it. "And I think it may have something to do with a current operation. The terrorists that have been causing trouble on the frontier are very likely the same sort of ones you fought that day, on Noya IV." He paused again, pondering the next matter. "As for you, Sergeant, how fit are you? Can you return to duty?"

Nevas looked surprised to hear this, but was quick to compose herself, clearly pleased. She had been in hospital for a long time, so getting out of there was a very welcome prospect.

"I'm in perfect working order, sir," she said.

"I'm sure you are," Caine replied. "I'll get the doctors over at the clinic to clear you officially. I could use you on the new mixed species anti-terrorist team. This might be a surprising offer, but you were recommended by those in High Command and I think you'd do well leading a squad of marines."

Nevas smiled. Caine returned the smile.

"Are you serious, General?" She asked.

"Of course. I've no reason to lie. You do have only two hours to pack your bags and report to landing pad seven, but as of now I'm officially putting you on the team. Don't worry about the doctors, as I said, I'll convince them to release you."

Nevas rose out of her chair and saluted. Caine felt like he had just done a good deed today. Nevas had experience against these alien terrorist types, something that would definitely be useful on the team. It only made sense to put her on the job,

"I'll be ready by then, sir," she said.

"Good. You're dismissed, Sergeant. It was very interesting, hearing about that raid. Maybe your future missions will be somewhat less chaotic."

With that, Nevas nodded, dropped the salute and then turned around, leaving the room. Caine was left mulling over whether he had made the right decision or not, as it seemed very likely that Lev'Kanar was the terrorist leader. He had the motivation and the influence, according to the reports. If he recognized Nevas...well, it would certainly make for an interesting mission. All the more reason for him to leave here and accompany the team to Paradise Falls.

## 11. Vanguard

\*\*Vanguard\*\*

January 20th, 2558

The Vanguard was a typical UNSC destroyer, about half a kilometre in length and a few hundred metres wide. From outside, it carried a mostly rectangular shape, with a set of powerful engines on its rear. There was nothing that immediately stood out about its design, as it was merely another ship of the line, intended to be used in frontline engagements. Most UNSC ships had been retrofitted with enhanced weapons systems during the last years of the war and continued to receive upgrades as a result of the advances being made in technology, a product of acquiring much Covenant and Forerunner tech in recent years. The Vanguard carried one large Magnetic Accelerator Cannon (MAC) on its underbelly; it was a weapon that fired a tungsten slug at speeds far in excess of the speed of sound, one that was able to punch through practically any amount of armour by sheer concussive force. The other armaments on board were a mix of missile launchers and small scale "rail" guns, though this particular destroyer had also received a pair of prototype beam weapons that were derived from a similar principle to the portable M6 Grindell laser weapon that had seen use in infantry divisions during the final months of the war.

The interior of the vessel consisted of uniformly decorated grey and beige coloured rooms, connected by rectangular-shaped corridors. There was little decoration, as there was little need for any 'flair' on a military vessel. Everything was where it was for practical purposes and there was little in the way of unneeded decor. The ship's complement was of about two hundred, including a few squads of marines. The bridge was located at the front of the ship, at the very bottom and was shielded by thick glass windows that provided a fairly wide view of the space outside. The bridge personnel consisted of about thirty officers with varying tasks that worked in rotating shifts. The rest of the crew worked at their assigned stations, such as engineering and weapons, ensuring that the ship's systems were functioning as they should.

Leon had been on ships like this before, so he was used to the rather utilitarian interior design approach. He had been given his own room, unlike the normal ship personnel who had to share their quarters with up to half a dozen other people. Room was at a premium on a small vessel such as this.

The Spartan had found his equipment already stored here and this included his set of green and grey 'Operator' model armour. He had not worn it for months, but he was glad to see it was still in good condition. He had pulled open the footlocker containing it and was now setting each piece of it out onto his bed, dusting it off with a piece of cloth and attempting to clean any traces of dirt from it. There were dents and scorch marks on places but otherwise the armour was still in working order.

Looking at it laid out before him while dressed in a standard grey Navy uniform, Leon was immediately reminded of all the missions he had gone on while wearing this armour. Every fight, every victory and every failure. He had been trained to treat the armour like a second-skin and that was exactly what it had been, though he wondered if it would still be like that if he wore it now.

Also contained in the footlocker was his M6 sidearm, the very one he had carried with him during the mission to New Sanctuary. It was dirty in places and Leon took a few minutes to wipe it clean with a piece of cloth. The pistol had been one he had carried with him into

many engagements, so like his armour it carried some kind of personal value to him.

With his belongings cleaned up properly, Leon turned around, walking over to the adjoining bathroom before taking a look at himself in the mirror. His back still ached but he could at least keep his footing when he stood up, so for all intents and purposes he was ready to get back into the thick of things. He considered heading out to one of the training rooms on board and exercising, as it was about time for his daily and fairly rigorous workout. According to the General, who had also come on board, they had well over a week before they arrived at Paradise Falls, a colony that lay on the very edge of UNSC-chartered space. Life could get fairly mundane on board a ship such as this, so keeping one's self occupied, even if it was just through training, was a priority.

He had no idea what awaited them at Paradise Falls. Reports from the new settlers there indicated it had been left relatively untouched by the Covenant, with its major towns deserted as a result of an evacuation during the early part of 2539. The Covenant had missed the world completely, leaving it as one of the few Outer Colonies that were intact by the end of the war. Others, such as Harvest, were being resettled and inter-colony commerce had started up again in earnest, as had insurrectionist attitudes.

Leon noticed the stubble that had formed on and around his chin, a result of being cooped up inside a hospital for months. Opening a cabinet beneath the mirror, he found a standard-issue Navy razor and got to work, carefully shaving away the unwanted facial hair. By the time he was done, he looked an awful lot more professional, no longer carrying the rugged and worn-out quality he had developed as a result of his life in the hospital. He had cut himself close to the chin, a small and rather unnoticeable cut that bled a surprising amount. His right hand, which had handled the razor, was shaking again. Leon cleaned up the cut as best he could, feeling it sting to the touch and even more so when he splashed cold water onto it.

As for his shaking right hand, there was little he could do about it. He supposed it was the result of the traumas he had been through, perhaps even the result of an injury he had received in the past that was causing these involuntary movements. It annoyed him, to see himself lose the control over his body he had been so used to having, but he was at a loss on what to do to stop it. There was even doubt in his head that he was completely ready to go back into combat, but he was not one to back out, certainly not when they were on their way to a mission location.

There was some concern about the alien team members, all of which were on board the destroyer somewhere. Leon did not completely trust them, particularly the Sangheili Major who was on the team, but there was a good indication that this distrust was involuntary, a result of the war and all the people he had seen killed by the species who were now apparently allies, or at the very least, under a cease-fire. There was no point blaming the alien team members for all the deaths he had witnessed during the war, as those deaths had been caused by other members of the same species. The ones on board now, in the team, were all war veterans but he had never seen any of the individual aliens before. They were all new to him, each with their own personality, as different as humans were amongst their own species. There was diversity amongst the Sangheili and Kig-Yar, even

if it was sometimes hard to notice.

His thoughts were interrupted when he heard the buzzer at his door ring. Leaving the bathroom, Leon looked towards the door, wondering momentarily about who it might be.

"Come in," he called. The door slid open, revealing the familiar figure of Sergeant Valerie Nevas, dressed in a Marine's uniform complete with rank insignia. As for her appearance, she had changed little since Leon had last saw her in the hospital.

Taking a look around the room, she stepped inside, the door sliding shut behind her. Leon was surprised to see her here, as he had assumed that she would be kept in the hospital for a while longer. He had sometimes wondered how someone like her, or anyone for that matter, could have survived what she had been through. From what he had heard, Valerie had suffered serious burns down one side and had spent months in reconstructive surgery. Leon had always had a fear of being burned alive, probably a result of seeing a few of his comrades suffer in the wake of a plasma explosion during a mission he had been on several years before. He could see there was some slight scarring at Valerie's neck, but otherwise she was looking fine.

"What are you doing here?" Leon asked, briefly taken off-guard upon seeing her.

"A 'hello' would have sufficed," Valerie snarked, taking a few more steps into the room. Her gaze floated over to the armour laid out across his bed. With keen interest visible on her features, she walked over and picked up the Operator-model helmet with its large rectangular visor. She looked into her reflection which was visible on the front of the visor before turning the helmet around in her hands, carefully examining the design.

"I didn't know you were assigned to this ship," Leon said. He walked over and took the helmet from her, getting a slightly annoyed look from Valerie before he set the helmet back onto the bed. "I thought they'd keep you in the hospital for a little while longer."

"I'm fit for duty," Valerie replied, turning to look at him. He was several inches taller than her and he found himself looking down into her face. At this close proximity, her blue eyes did stand out considerably compared to the rest of her rugged, but still somewhat feminine, features.

"And I've apparently got what it takes to be on this new team," she added, smiling. "I'm not about to complain about getting a new job, after all of this time."

"What about the Spartan-IV program? You told me you'd been offered a place in it."

"That can wait." Valerie paused, giving the idea some thought. "I'm not exactly in a hurry to get augmented. Part of me still doesn't like the idea."

"I'd say you could survive it, considering what else you've been through," Leon said.

Valerie shrugged. She did not seem very concerned about it and Leon

saw no reason for him to be, either.

"Maybe. But that's not why I'm here." Valerie walked over to a vacant chair that was located by a small metal desk that sat to the far right and against a wall. She swivelled about in it to face Leon, a grin showing up on her face.

"You still look surprised," she said, almost teasingly.

"You're on the team?" Leon frowned. "Why?"

"You don't think I'm good enough?" Valerie's tone changed to one of annoyance.

Leon quickly shook his head. In all the talks they had had, Leon had found Valerie to be very stubborn in some regards. There had been times when she would talk to him, even if he had told her he was not interested in talking, for whatever reason. She was not bothered when he did not answer her and instead continued speaking as if she was having a proper conversation with him, all while grinning. Leon got the impression that she did this just to get on his nerves.

"It's not that," Leon said. "I just don't know why an ordinary Marine—"

"\_Ordinary?\_" Valerie scoffed. "Is that all I am to you? Nothing special?"

"You knew what I meant. There's no real reason for you to be on the team."

"I'm leading the marines General Caine has assigned to the mission," Valerie said, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms.

"That's why I'm on board. It's simple, really."

Leon nodded in understanding. He supposed it made sense, but it still surprised him that Valerie had been pulled out of hospital just to do this. Caine must have been quite impressed with her record, compounded by the fact that she was apparently fit enough to get out of hospital.

"And why are you here, in my quarters?" Leon asked.

"I wanted to see my old friend from the hospital, that's all," Valerie answered, smiling at him. "I enjoyed the talks we used to have."

"Even if most of them were one-sided?"

Valerie shrugged. Leon felt a bit awkward, having her in his room like this. She did not seem bothered by it at all. If anything, it seemed inappropriate to have her here and if anyone found out they may assume it was more than a friendly visit. Leon did not want to make the time he spent on this ship any more awkward than it needed to be.

"What's the matter with you, Lieutenant?" Valerie said, frowning. "You're always so..." She trailed off, trying to think of the appropriate word. Finally, it came to her: "\_Inaccessible\_. You Spartans aren't very sociable."

"I've got a lot on my mind-"

"So do I. That doesn't stop me from trying to have a friendly conversation."

Leon sighed, walking over to the bed. He started to pick up the pieces of armour that had been laid upon it, giving each of them a final wipe clean with his piece of cloth before he began storing them back into his footlocker.

"I'm concerned about you, Lieutenant. As a friend and comrade." She stood up, taking a few steps towards him. "I just want to talk, as a friend."

Leon had not had many "friends" in his lifetime, save for the other Spartans and they had not only been his friends, but his family as well. With most of them gone, he had hardly anyone else to speak to and spent a great deal of his time alone and focusing on whatever mission lay ahead. His time in the hospital had been spent alone whenever he could, but part of him had yearned for other human contact so his ventures out into the recreation rooms there had lead him to Valerie. She had seemed determined to get to know him and occasionally he would tell her about himself. It only seemed fair when she told him about her.

"What do you want to talk about?" Leon asked as he put his armour away.

"Anything. Like...how's your back?"

"Better." Leon paused, feeling it throb as if on cue.

"I doubt it'll ever go completely back to normal. I mean, I get some serious itching down my right side sometimes. It's nothing a lotion can't fix, but it happens. A reminder that I'll never fully recover." Valerie sounded a bit sullen as she said this, running a hand down the scarring at her neck.

"You never told me exactly what happened," Leon said. "About how you got hurt. I heard some second-hand reports from others, but nothing detailed."

"Well, since you told me what happened to you, I suppose it's only fair I tell you my sorry story. It's nothing complicated, certainly not like yours was." Valerie paused, looking towards him with a disgruntled gaze, as if remembering what had happened angered her. "It was just a routine mission to weed out some loyalists two years ago. They had been hiding on New Harmony, amongst the ruins of one of the settlements there. As soon as we set down in a Pelican, we were ambushed and most of the squad got killed. I was unlucky enough to be caught in a grenade explosion. As for what happened after the explosion..." She shook her head. "I can barely remember it, though I know I was in a hell of a lot of pain."

"That's unsurprising," Leon said, noticing that Valerie had become noticeably more downbeat.

"The first few months were hard. I went through a lot of surgery to repair the damage. I couldn't look at myself in a mirror without

feeling sick. I guess I was lucky to get the treatment I did, since I look almost as good as new." She smiled at him. "Still, it was a long process. I was in that hospital for a long time. Life could get pretty boring. And when I saw you there and found out you were a Spartan, I thought I might try and get to know you. I'd never spoken to a Spartan before. You were almost a novelty."

Leon was not sure what to think of this. Even so, he had felt some degree of comfort when he spoke with Valerie at the hospital, even if he barely said anything to her sometimes. He would consider her a 'friend', even if she did like to get on his nerves.

"I'd rather not keep the subject matter so depressing," Valerie said, forming another smile. It was the sort of smile Leon had gotten used to during the time he had known her and sometimes seeing it made him feel better, if only slightly. "We're both out of the hospital. That's good, ain't it? No longer wasting away in there."

"Yeah, it's good."

There was a long silence between the two of them. Leon felt somewhat awkward, standing where he was and looking at her, how she was sitting back in the chair casually with her arms crossed. Usually she was very talkative, but it was as if something was interfering with this aspect of her. It seemed there was something on her mind, but Leon could not be sure. He had never been a good judge of what people were thinking. He had never been good with people in general, save for the other Spartans he had known. They had been mostly the same, with some obvious differences in character. He could relate to the other Spartans as they had been through the same training, many of the same battles and had many of the same mindsets. As for actual ordinary human beings who had not been trained from a young age and with their wildly differing personalities, Leon had virtually no idea on how to interact with them. He even felt out of place on this ship, being one of only two Spartans on board. Compound this with the insults he often received from the normal soldiers and he felt like even more of an outsider.

Still, he was a survivor. Surviving often meant losing those who meant the most to you. Sometimes he thought that it might have been easier to have been one of the ones who had been lost. He knew such thinking was not healthy and he was quick to stop it. He was here, alive and well, and it was best he adapt to the new circumstances. That was one thing Spartans had been trained to do: adapt.

"To be honest, Leon," Valerie said, rising out of her chair and walking towards him. "When I saw you in that hospital for the first time, you looked like you needed a friend. What you've told me, about losing all your friends during the war...It's awful."

"I live with it," Leon said. "I'm supposed to be expendable, after all."

"No one's expendable."

"The people who came up with the Spartan-III project would disagree with you," Leon replied. "I'm one of the lucky ones. When the people I grew up with and fought alongside became considered 'acceptable casualties', I was the one who would somehow survive and only complicate matters. I was moved between squads regularly since I kept

surviving things I shouldn't have. When I'd start to befriend those on my current squad, we'd be sent off on some mission against the Covenant and half those people in the squad would get killed. I've lived with the fact that I have a habit of living through things no one expects me to. What happened to me on New Sanctuary was the latest in a long line of things that should have killed me, but didn't. For a while there, I wasn't even in a squad. I was a solo operator. Now I have another team, I can't help but think the same thing will happen. I'll survive and everyone else I know, the people I'm becoming friends with, will die."

Valerie frowned before shaking her head. Leon knew his attitude was a very negative one, but he had his reasons why it was like that.

"Maybe you've survived everything for a reason," Valerie said. "Do you believe in fate?"

>"I believe that shit happens." <br> Valerie shrugged at this.

"I suppose that's a valid way of thinking about it," she said. She paused and then looked up at him, a gentle look on her face. "Though Lieutenant, I have to be honest with you: I think I like you. The talks we've had, the months we've known each other..."

Leon frowned. It took a moment for him to realize what Valerie meant.

"We're friends. That's all." He swallowed, noticing the slight twinge of disappointment that briefly appeared on Valerie's face.

"I can already see you're uncomfortable." Valerie smirked. "Maybe I should leave?"

She went to turn around and walk away but Leon found himself putting a hand to her shoulder, making her stop in her tracks before she turned back to face him. He was not sure what he was doing, but whatever doubts he had were quickly quelled when Valerie took the physical contact as some sort of signal, leaning towards him and planting her lips firmly on his own. Leon was taken aback, even more so as she put a hand to his cheek and another to his side, pulling him closer. The kiss did not last very long.

Leon pushed her away, his hands shaking as Valerie opened her eyes and smiled at him. Noticing his expression of shock, she quickly lost her confident demeanour and seemed to descend into a considerably more anxious one.

"Maybe I should leave," she said again, her tone muted.

Leon felt like he was throwing something good away, even if he had never done this sort of thing before. He had been virtually blind to all the signs Valerie had been giving him, so it seemed that she had finally decided to make it clear to him.

"Don't leave," Leon croaked.

Valerie raised an eyebrow.

"If you don't want me here, that's fine. I don't want to make things awkward, especially if we're going to be working together."

There was a long silence between the two of them. Leon reached out and put a hand to her cheek, trailing his coarsened fingers down the slightly imperfect skin, a result of the regenerative surgeries she had undergone. They were both scarred from their experiences, physically and mentally. It almost seemed fitting that they would wind up together like this.

"I'm sure things will be fine," Leon said. "As you've told me before, I should stop being so negative." He actually managed to crack a smile as he said this. Valerie's mood brightened noticeably.

"Good to hear," she said. "As for what happens next..." She trailed the fingers of one hand down his chest. "I can think of a few things we could do."

\* \* \*

><p>Kal'Shayar was not terribly fond of the way human ships were designed. They were very bland, with grey metal corridors and rooms that were mostly square or rectangular in shape. Covenant-built ships may have had dim lighting and an overdose of blue and purple hues, but they had considerably more 'character' to them than the practical, but bare, designs of human vessels. Regardless, he had taken the time to look around the ship, receiving odd glances from any human personnel he happened to walk by but this was not something he paid a whole lot of attention to.</p>

The vessel had entered slip-space a few hours ago, starting on its way to Paradise Falls. It would be over a week before they arrived at the world, leaving Kal'Shayar with little to do during that time. He would train, that was for certain, and he would hopefully keep Javal and the squad under control lest they try to start trouble with any of the humans on board (and this was very likely).

Kal'Shayar had received his own private quarters that were connected to a dormitory space for the Kig-Yar squad. Having the privacy of his own room was most welcome and it at least ensured he would not have to sleep in the same room as Javal and the rest of the squad. He had mostly free access to the ship, save for some restricted areas that included the engineering section. This was understandable as there was no reason for him to need to go to these sections, but even so it did tell him that he was not entirely trusted by the humans. They were working together and in his view, it made sense for them to trust one another. How could they ensure the mission was a success if they did not trust each other? There would be secrets being kept and that could likely lead to trouble. Secrets often did that.

Dressed in his orange armour, save for the helmet, Kal'Shayar was making his way back to his quarters when he heard music. His species did have its own varieties of music, but this was not like any of those he knew. This was something else, carrying a degree of refinement and wisdom, its soothing, almost downbeat tones echoing down the corridor. He was able to pinpoint its origin quite accurately with his sensitive hearing, discovering that it emanated from a large room near the end of the corridor.

The room had several chairs scattered about, as well as a few vid-screens and gaming units. It was definitely a sort of recreational area, but at this time it was deserted save for Elise,

who was sitting at the end of the room near a music player that was set into the wall. She was sitting back with a book in one hand, her gaze on the pages before her. Kal'Shayar walked inside, feeling strangely drawn to the music as it was not like anything he had ever heard before. The Commander heard him enter and looked up, surprised to see him here.

"Kal," she said, reaching over to the music player with one hand. She turned a dial and the volume dropped abruptly, the song now barely audible. Kal'Shayar regarded her with a friendly gaze, eyeing the book she held. It was worn in places, an obvious sign of age. "What do you need?"

"I heard the music," Kal'Shayar said. "Kig-Yar hearing is considerably more sensitive than that of a human. However, I did not expect to find you here."

"My quarters are nearby," Elise replied. "But they're pretty bare, so I came here. It's nice, when it's empty like this. Just me, and now you. Gives me a chance to relax and think." She paused, lowering the book, keeping a finger on the page she was up to while she closed it. "You like the song?"

Kal'Shayar was not sure. He nodded, but he would have to hear more of it if he were to properly judge its quality. Elise nodded, obviously pleased to see that he liked it.

"It's a pretty old one. It's by someone named 'Pachelbel'. Very easy to listen to, very soothing." She paused, regarding him with a curious gaze. "I didn't think you Kig-Yar were the music-loving types."

"We're not," Kal'Shayar said, matter-of-factly. "We do have our own forms, but it is not something as intrinsic to our culture as it is for humans. Though, I have not heard anything quite like the song that was playing before."

"I could give you a copy, so you can listen to it in your own time."

"That would be good."

There was a brief silence. Elise gave an annoyed look, her hand going to a red scratch at her neck. Kal'Shayar noticed it and gave the Skirmisher equivalent of a frown.

"One of your friends started a fight in the mess hall a little while ago," Elise said, noticing the direction of his gaze. "I went to break it up, but he caught me with one of his claws. He's lucky I don't have his ass thrown off the ship, but Caine told me it's best I let it slide. We need their help."

"Which one did it to you?" Kal'Shayar asked, feeling a rising sense of anger. Elise was a human and thus a bit more softer than a typical Kig-Yar. Their claws could cause serious injury, something that Kal'Shayar wanted to prevent from happening during the time they worked with the humans, for obvious reasons. Seeing Elise with a nasty scratch on her like that simply angered him.

"Your second-in-command," Elise said. "You look upset. Don't worry

about it, I'm fine. You might want to discipline your Kig-Yar friends, though."

"That is exactly what I will do," Kal'Shayar said. Javal deserved another beating and Kal'Shayar, being his superior, was the one best suited to give it to him. "I apologize, Commander. I am meant to keep them under control, but obviously I was not successful."

"I told you before, you can call me 'Elise'. And this wasn't your fault, so there's no use blaming yourself for it. You weren't even there."

"Perhaps I should have been..."

"But you weren't. What's done is done. I'm not seriously hurt and there's nothing more to discuss about it." She paused, narrowing her eyes. "I'm surprised you're so concerned about me."

"Why would you be surprised?" Kal'Shayar asked. He had not thought he had made his concern completely obvious, but Elise was clearly intuitive enough to pick up on it. "Keeping my squad under control is one of my responsibilities. I would hate to see you, or anyone else on this ship, get hurt by any one from my squad."

Elise smiled, appreciating the concern. Kal'Shayar glanced at the book she was holding.

"A paper-bound book? That is a rare sight and I did not expect humans to still have any. Computerized ones seem far more popular."

"This old thing?" Elise held it up. "My father gave this to me. He was a literature professor, so he was always giving me books and trying to get me into reading, usually heavy stuff as well. He appreciates physical copies far more than most other people. There's an odd quality to having a physical book, rather than relying on the electronic ones. It's easier to form some kind of sentimental attachment to a proper book like this." She opened to the page she had been reading. "As for the subject matter, it's old poetry. Most of it's typically vague, but my father used to tell me that's part of the charm with this sort of writing. I'm trying to appreciate it, but sometimes I'm just not sure what it is I'm reading."

Kal'Shayar was curious, as he was not familiar with this particular style of human writing. Poetry did exist for Kig-Yar and it had once been a common way of retelling stories of past battles, up until more recent decades.

"I am curious," he said, leaning forwards slightly. "I would not mind hearing some of this 'poetry'."

"Really?" Elise looked surprised for a second, but then just nodded in acceptance. "I suppose I can indulge you. Maybe you can get more out of it than I can?"

She looked at the page she was on, frowned, and then started flicking through the pages, skimming what she could before settling on a particular page. Kal'Shayar had often gotten the impression that the humans were not too different to his own species. To discover that they valued old writings and music as much as his own people did, even more so in some cases, simply reinforced this view.

"Okay..." She paused, and then started reading: *\_Turning and turning in the widening gyre/ The falcon cannot hear the falconer;/ Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/ Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,/ The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/ The ceremony of innocence is drowned;/ The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity.\_* She stopped, her gaze going back towards Kal'Shayar.

"Well, Kal," she said, lowering the book again. "What do you make of that?"

Kal'Shayar gave it some thought. Whoever had written that particular verse must have envisioned a scene of chaos, as far as he could tell. Even so, there were a few things that did not make too much sense to him (what was a 'falcon'?)

"I..." He paused, taking note of Elise's grin. She found his speechlessness amusing. "Well, I think it requires a human to appreciate more. I am not even aware of the context."

"It doesn't matter," Elise replied. "Maybe one day you could tell me some Kig-Yar poetry and I can be just as confused as you are right now."

Kal'Shayar gave a smile, though he could not be certain if Elise saw it as such.

"Very well then, Comm...I mean, Elise. Perhaps, when this mission is over, I will find some Kig-Yar poetry for you to read." He was willing to do this, but he had none of his old books on board. They were all back in his house on Sauem, well out of reach.

"You know, Kal, I think we have ourselves a nice little friendship here. Perhaps the first of its kind. A Kig-Yar and a human, having a nice little chat about poetry. I don't think that's happened before."

"It probably has not," Kal'Shayar said. He felt quite comfortable being here with her, something that was unique to this human. Most of the others made him feel uneasy to some extent (usually minor). He could not see himself becoming quick friends with any of them, but Elise was different. Why she was, he could not determine.

"How about we make another first," Elise said. "I can show you a movie. You know what that is, don't you?"

He knew of what she meant, but the word 'movie' was strictly a human term. Entertainment vids differed with the species, but the principles were similar.

"I can dig out one of the old classics from the computer archives," Elise said, rising out of her chair. "Come on."

Kal'Shayar watched as she walked over to one of the computer terminals at the wall. With some uncertainty, he walked up to her, standing near her as she started sifting through the information displayed on the terminal whilst working her way through hundreds of movie titles. Kal'Shayar found the whole situation odd, but strangely relaxing. He could not find companionship in anyone of the Kig-Yar in

his squad, but he could find it with a human. Maybe their species were destined to work together, after all. Making friends with a human was definitely a good start to improving relations between the species. Kal'Shayar had no problem being exposed to human culture like this, as he considered it an interesting learning experience.

## 12. Winding Down

\*\*Winding Down  
><strong>

January 31st, 2558

Leon liked to think that he was still capable of the sorts of things he had been able to do before his near-death on New Sanctuary, but the fact was that his skills were 'rusty'. He had kept fit during his stay in the hospital, but he had been unable to partake in actual training, save for learning how to properly walk again. He had been holed up in a hospital for months and his injuries, though mostly healed by now, had done damage that was very much irreversible. He felt slower than he used to, less coordinated. His marksmanship abilities had become considerably worse and as for his close-quarter fighting skills, they were in even worse shape. Even now, standing in one of the training rooms on board the Vanguard, Leon was finding it hard to hold his own against the attacks Serena was sending his way.

It was a practice fight, nothing more. The Lieutenant-Commander had suggested it, as she clearly doubted his abilities. Now they were here, both of them dressed in grey tank-tops and tracksuit pants while they threw blows at each other. Leon had been defending himself from Serena's fluid and relentless attacks for several minutes, becoming a panting, sweating wreck as he blocked each strike. He was barely able to get in a hit of his own, knowing full well that Serena was giving him everything she had, as if to prove to herself that Leon was not in the proper condition to be on the mission.

Being a practice match, Leon could have called it off at any time. He was too prideful to do that, even if it meant getting the tar beaten out of him. He needed this, if only to help him improve and get him back to his former standards. Serena was using some form of mixed martial-arts, occasionally spinning about as she went to send either a kick or a punch his way, whichever she deemed appropriate for the time. Leon had been trained thoroughly in close-quarters combat but lacked the range of moves that Serena clearly had, a result of his lack of experience compared to the Spartan-II. She was also slightly taller than him, carrying a great deal of muscle. Though the enhancements the Spartan-IIIs had received had been less refined, they had also been more potent, with only the strongest surviving the process. Leon, being a Spartan-III, had received the more generalized enhancements, a result of a decision made by the the people who had created the Spartan project. They had hoped to increase the success rate. Leon, if he was up to the level of his previous standards, would usually have been able to hold his own against Serena. In this particular situation, he was finding it difficult just to stay on the padded mat they were fighting on. He was being forced to back away regularly, only able to regain some ground on occasion as he would quickly skip to either side and close the distance, turning Serena

around and attempting to score a quick blow. It was a fairly repetitive means of fighting, but it was all he could muster right now, with much of his body aching as a result of the sudden exertion.

The training room was fairly large, full of assorted types of exercise and training equipment. They were in one corner, fighting on a padded grey mat that would cushion any falls they had. Serena kept to the centre of it as Leon skipped around her, trying to catch her off-guard but finding each attempt at scoring a blow on her successfully deflected or dodged. She was fast, even more so than he was, and she had only the slightest trace of sweat on her brow. Leon, on the other hand, was drenched with sweat, his tank-top wet all down its front, his hair slick. As much as it pained him to think about it, but he felt like a tired old man who was way past his prime, trying to prove that he was not if only to make himself feel better.

Leon kept his arms up in front of him as Serena sent another quick jab his way. He ducked his head to one side and avoided it before deflecting her arm away with one of his own. She was quick to recover, spinning suddenly and sending a powerful kick into his chest. It tenderized his pectoral muscles and knocked the wind right out of him, making him stumble. Serena followed up with a left hook that struck the side of his face, sending a wave of pain through his skull before he fell backwards, landing in a heap on the mat. He rolled onto his side, trying to catch his breath while Serena stood over him, looking down with a typically stoic gaze, saying nothing. She was not the type to gloat.

With some effort, he rolled onto his front and lifted himself up, gradually turning around to face his opponent. She regarded him with the slightest of frowns, surprised to see him up again despite his current state. He was covered with sweat, despite the air conditioning, and was breathing heavily. For a moment he remained still, hunched over slightly, his hands at his thighs while he caught his breath. His back had started aching again, though it was bearable. The light fixtures in the ceiling above seemed brighter than before, the white light leaving scorch marks on his vision as he blinked. Serena was waiting for him to throw the first punch, assuming that he wanted to end the fight rather than drag it out any further.

Standing up straight again, Leon struck a ready pose before stepping forwards. Serena did the same. Leon told himself he would wear her out as much as she had to him, though he doubted just how successful he would be in this venture.

With a careful move, he went for a low strike with his left hand. Serena went to deflect it but the intended blow had been a feint, with Leon spinning suddenly and sending a roundhouse-kick into her gut. Serena grunted but stood her ground, recovering fast as she put a powerful blow into his stomach. Leon ignored the pain that erupted there and grabbed one of her arms. He tucked it past his shoulder before moving low and this in turn threw the Spartan-II over him before she plonked straight onto the floor. She looked startled for a moment, but was quick to jump back onto her feet.

From nearby, somebody started clapping. Leon relaxed and turned around to face the origin of the noise, as did Serena who was now

looking slightly miffed.

"Good move, Lieutenant," General Caine said, grinning. He ceased clapping and put one hand to the cigar jutting from the corner of his mouth, pulling it out before releasing a stream of smoke. "I was almost beginning to doubt you, but it seems you're not completely hopeless."

Leon figured that the fight was over, so with some relief he walked over to a bench a short walk from the fighting area and sat down, taking up a towel that had been lying there. He wiped much of the sweat away but would certainly need to wash himself properly to get the best result.

"Although, I doubt having the crap beaten out of you is good for training purposes," Caine added, frowning slightly. "Was this the Lieutenant-Commander's idea?"

>Serena stepped forwards, snapping off a quick salute before replying.<p>

"It was, sir," she said. "I thought that the Lieutenant could do with a better test of his fighting abilities. As I have told you, I don't think he is quite fit for duty."

"So you tried to beat him senseless?" Caine looked unimpressed, but Serena shook her head.

"It was a fair fight. The Lieutenant would do well to broaden his range of fighting styles."

"Maybe." Caine nodded in agreement, returning his gaze towards Leon. "What do you think, Lieutenant? Do you want to broaden your range a little?"

Leon had nothing against this idea, but 'training' with Serena lacked a great deal of appeal. She seemed determined to certify her superiority over him, not just through rank but by physical fighting prowess as well.

"Thing is, Serena," Caine said after a pause. "The Lieutenant hasn't got your experience. Sure, you've both been through a lot of fights against the Covenant and insurgents, but Leon's range of experiences are a bit more limited. He hasn't had the time to refine them as well as you have, Serena. I'm sure he's willing to learn, but I think you'd do well to go easy on him. As I said, beating the crap out of someone isn't going to work very well as 'training'."

Serena nodded in response. Caine regarded the two of them, a thoughtful look crossing his face as if he had just remembered why he had paid them a visit.

"We'll be arriving at Paradise Falls in about thirty hours," Caine said. "The ship's Captain assures me we'll have full support from his crew for the mission. That includes air support when you're on the ground, but I doubt we'll need it. If we do need it, then I'd assume that means we screwed up something." He paused, smiling again. "I'm confident that neither of you will screw up."

Leon took a drink from a bottle of water that had been on the bench, put there by him prior to his fight with Serena. His mind wandered a

bit as he sat listening to the General, thinking of what they might actually find on Paradise Falls, a colony that had been deserted for well over a decade. The resettlement had begun only a few months before with only a small contingent of human colonists. The fact that it sat on the edge of Kig-Yar space meant that there was some dispute over which race 'owned' the planet, but so far the Kig-Yar had done little to fight for their claim. Leon thought that they were likely busy dealing with their own problems, rather than fight with the humans over a single planet.

"What about our alien guests, sir?" Serena asked. "I heard they have started trouble on more than one occasion."

"The Jackals have started a few fights," Caine answered. "No serious damage has been done, but I've had to order that one, Javal or whatever-his-name is, confined to quarters. Until we're at Paradise Falls, he's going to be stuck in there. I get the impression that one doesn't like humans a whole lot, but none of us can really do much about his prejudices. In a way, they're understandable. We were at war for over twenty-five years." He paused, before adding: "I think we're better off working together, but not everyone shares that viewpoint. Even some of the people in High Command don't think this joint operation is a good idea. We've got aliens on one of our ships, for instance. That's giving them quite an insight into our systems, but I'm making sure they're all under surveillance. It wasn't my idea to do that, but even I take orders from someone."

"Is there any information on what we can expect to find on Paradise Falls?" Leon asked.

"We've sent a probe ahead," Caine replied, "But the planet's ionosphere contains certain trace elements that interfere with sensors, so any thorough scans aren't possible. We do know where to send you in, but as for the amount of hostiles you might encounter..." He trailed off, shaking his head with a concerned grimace. "I'm afraid you'll be going in blind. It's not what I'd like, but it's unavoidable."

Leon did not like the sound of this, but it would not be the first time he had been sent into a possible combat zone with little intel. He would have plenty of support this time around, so that would definitely tip the odds in favour of the mission succeeding.

"What exactly are we looking for down there?" He asked.

"A computer powerful enough to contain a military grade AI," Caine said. "Remember, we tracked it to an old museum in the main settlement, so there's a good chance that's where you'll find it."

Leon nodded. He supposed they would be properly briefed before being sent down to the planet's surface, but it was doubtful they would have much new intel by that time.

"As for the next thirty hours, you'd do well to wind down," Caine suggested.

\* \* \*

><p>There were some odd thoughts in Elise's mind as she sat alone in

the recreation room. For the last several days she had gone about her duties on board, working at one of the operations stations on the bridge on occasion. That was the sort of thing she was best-suited for, even though she would have liked fieldwork much more. Now she had some downtime, so she had returned to her usual spot in one of the recreational halls and had resumed reading her book. There were a few other people in here, doing their own thing and talking amongst themselves. Things were fairly quiet, with the faint hum of the ship's engines providing a soothing ambience.<p>

Her talks with Kal'Shayar had taught her much about the Kig-Yar, particularly the 'Skirmisher' sub-species. She had always been fascinated by alien races, so befriending an actual alien had been something she was very pleased with. Kal'Shayar, despite his raptor-like appearance, carried an air of authority, even nobility. He was a seasoned veteran of the war who was trying to find a purpose for himself now that the war was over. Elise found herself thinking about the things he had told her, about his race and about himself. It was almost disconcerting, in a way, thinking about this intriguing alien more than she should have.

And in exchange, she had told him much about herself. He had seemed interested, just as curious about her as she had been about him. Their peoples were similar in many ways, but different in just as many ways. And instead of focusing on what she was reading, she found herself thinking about him. He had told her about Sauem, his home-world, one of several major colonies the Kig-Yar had set-up over the past few centuries. How it was practically a tropical paradise all across its surface, with archipelagos and glimmering jewels of cities.

Why would she be thinking so much about this, anyway? It was almost as if she was becoming obsessed. She kept her fascination about the aliens to herself, but she found herself wanting to go to Sauem, if only to see it all for herself. Kal'Shayar was the only one of the aliens on board whom she had properly spoken with. None of the others seemed willing to talk with a human, while Kal'Shayar had opened herself up to him far more than she had first expected. He had even told her about the family he had once had, only for illness to take away all but his son who was now a criminal and very likely dead.

She put aside her book and sat back in her chair, unsure whether this was healthy behaviour or not. There were more important matters, yet she found herself thinking about the alien warrior she had befriended.

She had noticed how distant he seemed from the others and how he seemed to try and spend more time with her than the other Kig-Yar. She felt strange thinking about him in this way and was quick to quell any of the more awkward things that cropped up into her mind about him. Her friendship with Kal'Shayar was one she valued, but anything more than that made her want to hit her head against the nearest wall. It was way too early to be thinking of him like that, despite her curiosities. The thought also made her feel disgusted, more with herself than to him.

There was little else to do on this ship outside of her routine shifts on the bridge. Until they arrived at Paradise Falls, which would not be for another full day, she would have to put up with a

lack of proper activity on her schedule. That gave her more time to herself, but it also meant more time spent sitting around reading. Most of the people on board she had never met before, save for the Captain who was a former superior officer of hers. She had had friends back on Reach, but here she would have to make entirely new ones. The thing was, she had Kal'Shayar to talk to and since he sought her out for conversation as much as she did for him, they found themselves spending a great deal of their downtime hanging around this recreational hall. She had showed him some of the games on the computers here and he had taken to them very quickly, his superior reflexes giving him a very powerful edge in them.

Someone entered the room at that point, interrupting her train of thought. He was dressed in a green camouflage uniform, unlike the grey Navy uniforms most of the crew members wore. She recognized him as Colonel Paul Green, the mercenary who had been assigned to the operation. He walked over to one of the drink dispensers set into the wall on the right and proceeded to fill up a cup with hot coffee. He hummed to himself quietly, seemingly carefree.

Elise had a distrust of the man, especially when she had learned of his insurgent-turned-mercenary background. Caine had assigned him to the team because of the many outside sources he had which had provided them with useful intel. This had included, oddly enough, a few alien sources, indicating that the Colonel was not above working with the aliens they had spent over two decades fighting.

Elise was hoping he would not come over, but he did, recognizing her from the team. They had spoken very little in the past and Elise had avoided him during their time on the ship. Now she felt cornered and knew full well that the Colonel had been eyeing her up. He seemed like the sleazy type, something that seemed fitting for a mercenary.

"Commander McGillon," he said, giving a friendly smile. He walked towards her, standing a short distance ahead of her. "I'm Colonel Green, from the team. You do remember me, right?"

"Yes," Elise said, looking up at him. His smile belied something else, probably a prelude to flirting attempts. Green was not bound by the regulations she had to follow. Private contractors were not bound by many regulations at all.

"Just making sure," he quipped. "I've made it my mission to get to know the team members. I already have spoken to the Spartans, even tried my luck with the Sangheili Major, but you have been a bit trickier. I get the impression that you've been avoiding me."

Elise raised an eyebrow, smirking.

"What if I have?" She asked, deciding to see how Green reacted.

He was not bothered and instead returned her smirk. To him, this was a game, a fun little diversion from the boredom of life on the ship. Unlike Elise, he had no real job here, being nothing more than a passenger. As a result, he had a lot of spare time, so even when he spent some of that time attempting to contact his outside sources for further intel, he still had plenty of opportunity to do his own thing.

"You don't like me, Commander?" Green asked. "I can understand. I'm not a proper soldier, am I? I'm a private contractor and I know a lot of you officers don't like my type."

"I also don't like the way you look at my ass whenever I walk past you," Elise said, narrowing her gaze. "You're not very good at keeping that sort of thing subtle."

Green gave a brief, but genuine, laugh.

"Well, Commander, I can't really help it," he said. "You see, I'm a man, and you're a young, attractive woman. Don't you like the attention? I can't be the only one who looks at you that way."

"You're not. But you're the one who makes it the most obvious." Elise considered coming up with some excuse to end the conversation, but she could not really think of anything. Her shift had ended only half an hour ago and there was a good chance Green would know that. She had to work with the man, so getting on his bad side was probably not the best idea. Still, she wanted to kill whatever fantasies he had of 'scoring' with her.

"I'm not big on subtlety," Green said. "I thought you might have read my personnel file. That would have made it clear. For instance, I have a habit of blowing things up when I go on a routine operation. I've pissed off a few higher-ups by calling in air strikes on small groups of infantry."

Elise shook her head.

"I'm afraid I haven't bothered reading yours," she said.

Green looked almost hurt by this comment, but only for a split second.

"I read yours," he said. "You're a go-getter, something I like. A strong, determined military woman."

"And one capable of knocking you on your arse," Elise said. She frowned, having the urge to stand up and kick him. "Look, if you want to talk, we can talk. But don't get any ideas about going any further than that."

"What's not to like about me?" Green asked teasingly.

"I take it you're one of those people who can't take 'no' for an answer?" Elise asked.

This conversation was already getting on her nerves. She rose out of her chair, giving the Colonel a stern look. He technically outranked her, but she had a feeling that his 'Colonel' title was not really official, perhaps even self-awarded.

"I'll go if you want me to," Colonel Green said. "But you don't know what you're missing out on."

"I couldn't care less."

Green gave a curt nod, a mocking smile crossing his face, before he

turned around and walked out of the room. He took a final sip from his cup of coffee as he went. Elise, feeling somewhat relieved, sat back down in her chair. She would dig out the Colonel's personnel file later, that way she might gain a better insight into the man. It was clear to her that he was a renegade, here only because it paid well and not because he actually believed in what they were doing. People like that could be dangerous, even unpredictable. General Caine must have trusted him, as he had assigned him to the team, but that may have been the result of a previously established friendship. She would have to talk to the General about this, as she had her concerns about Green's reliability. He was not the only private contractor on board: there were a few others, part of the Colonels squad, who were also affiliated with the team. Elise had seen them around, easily recognizable in their unique uniforms and the goat's head emblem they wore at their shoulders. That emblem represented Green's own personal army of mercenaries.

Elise picked up her book again, but found herself thinking about Kal'Shayar. She wondered what he was up to now, figuring he was somewhere training with his squad. He had told her just how undisciplined some of those in his squad were and how it would be his responsibility to bring them under control. Judging from the way he had sounded when speaking about them, it was likely that this would be very difficult for the Skirmisher.

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><p>"Why must you continue starting trouble with the humans?" Kal'Shayar had his anger under control, but Javal had been testing his patience for the past week. Every now and then the younger Kig-Yar hybrid would instigate a fight with someone on the ship's crew. So far no serious damage had been caused, but the sheer fact that he kept causing trouble indicated that he lacked the discipline required for a mission such as this.</p>

Kal'Shayar stood in the squad's quarters, a short distance from where Javal sat on the edge of a bed. The younger Kig-Yar had been confined here until their arrival at Paradise Falls. While the other squad members were going about the ship, spending a great deal of time training in one of the gym areas, Javal was stuck in here with a guard posted outside of the room. The common Kig-Yar were far less disciplined than the Skirmishers, this much was well known amongst their race. Where the Skirmishers respected their superiors, the common Kig-Yar had a tendency to rebel. They did not like authority, something that contributed to their rather disorganized and ineffective capitalist government. On Sauem, a Skirmisher-controlled world, the government was far more effective and fairer to the people. Despite the better organization of the Skirmisher military compared to that of the common Kig-Yar, they had seen far more losses during the war, enough to cripple their military completely. It was perhaps a result of their previous Covenant superiors, most of them Sangheili, who would send them on suicide missions and place them in frontline positions.

Javal's problems were compounded by his dislike of Kal'Shayar. The hybrid had had an abusive full-blooded Skirmisher father, so it was somewhat understandable that he had a dislike of his Skirmisher commanding officer. Even so, being as disrespectful as he was would have been punishable by demotion, had the Covenant regulations still been in place. Since no serious damage had been done to anyone, there

was no real reason for harsh punishment to be delivered. All Kal'Shayar had to do was gain the younger one's trust.

"I do not need to listen to you," Javal said. "This whole mission is a waste of time. Working with humans?" He shook his head in disgust. "Why would we bother?"

Kal'Shayar gave a Skirmisher-style frown. He wore his usual armour, as did Javal. He scratched at where one section on his arm met the under-suit he wore, thinking that it felt a bit tighter than usual. It had been years since he had worn this armour, so it would take some getting used to again.

"Of course, I've seen you willingly interact with them. The same goes for a few people in the squad. You like the humans, don't you?"

"They are much like ourselves, Javal..."

"They plot to destroy us," Javal interrupted. "They are the most powerful race in this part of the galaxy. As for us? We lack the strength we once had. The war took it away from us. We're simply aiding the humans in their plans for eventual conquest."

"That is a foolish belief," Kal'Shayar said angrily. "If they wanted to conquer us, they would have done it already. Instead, they have opened up peaceful relations. Working with them is the best step forward for both of our species." He paused for a moment, seeing that Javal did not look convinced. "Would you like me to have you thrown off of this ship? I could arrange to have you 'left behind' on Paradise Falls."

Javal's face, which had been relatively expressionless up to this point, screwed up noticeably at the threat. Kal'Shayar had pulled a similar stunt on a few unruly subordinates during the war, something he was not proud of but it had been necessary in his view. As much as he would have liked to avoid doing it again, it seemed unavoidable with Javal.

"Resorting to threats, are we?" Javal said, his voice laced with a tone of disgust.

"Maybe you will listen then," Kal'Shayar said.

"I wonder if your human friend knows." Javal leaned forwards, peering up at him. "You portray yourself as some kind of noble warrior, but you're really no better than the commoners. You Skirmishers always have had that superior attitude. Perhaps I should tell your human friend all about the things you did during the war? I've done my reading about you, Champion."

"The humans know of what I have done." Kal'Shayar realized just what particular human Javal was referring to. "As for Commander McGillon, she is none of your concern. The two of us simply talk. It is fascinating, to learn about their species."

"You've been spending a great deal of time with her..."

"Because she is perhaps the only friend I have on this vessel," Kal'Shayar said sternly. "As much as I would like to be friends with

you, Javal, you are disrespectful and rebellious. I wonder how you even made it into the military in the first place, considering your unruly nature."

"I made it because I was strong," Javal said, rising to his feet. He closed the distance between him and Kal'Shayar in a few steps. Looking straight into the Skirmisher's eyes, he spoke: "My father would beat me into submission if I showed any weakness. He forced me to enter the military, to become a soldier. If I had failed to pass training, he might have killed me, or at the very least, disowned me. I was determined not to let that happen."

"So the problem stems from your abusive father?" Kal'Shayar ran a hand through the plumes on his head in dismay. "That is no reason to hate the humans. And that is no reason to hate me. I am not your father. I am not about to beat you for disobeying orders, though now that I think about it, it may prove effective on you."

"I can defend myself," Javal said.

"I know you can. All I want, Javal, is your cooperation. This mission may not seem important to us, but it will shape the future of our species. If this goes badly and the humans suffer at the hands of these terrorists, they may blame us. The terrorists in question are our brethren, after all."

Javal was silent for a moment, anger still visible on his face but he seemed to be thinking about what Kal'Shayar had said. Perhaps the Skirmisher was finally getting through to him?

"We can help shape the future of peaceful relations between our species and the humans," Kal'Shayar said. "I need your help with that."

"I'll follow your orders, Champion," Javal replied after a lengthy pause. "But we are not friends. We will never be friends."

Kal'Shayar nodded. He could live with that. He at least had friends in the form of Elise McGillon, and maybe a few others in the Kig-Yar squad who were not as unruly as Javal.

"I will speak to the General about seeing you allowed out of these quarters," Kal'Shayar said. "Until then, you are still confined here."

Javal sat back down on the bed, clearly annoyed about this but remained silent. Kal'Shayar turned around, feeling somewhat relieved that he had seemingly quelled Javal's rebellious nature for now. Heading out into the corridor, Kal'Shayar made his way to his room which was located a short distance away. The inside of it was mostly bare, with a bed, a desk and his trunk of belongings but little else. There was an adjoining bathroom through a door to the right, a bathroom that was rather cramped and contained the bare essentials (there was no shower or bath, rather those were shared and located further down the corridor). Kal'Shayar had to wash himself when there was no one else at the showers, as he certainly was not going to do so when there were humans with him. Bathing was a private thing, a belief the humans clearly did not share in the confines of their vessels.

His mind occasionally thought about Elise, as he enjoyed the talks he had with her. She had showed him a few 'movies' over the past week, most of which had been a bit hard to understand given his limited knowledge of human culture and history. Still, talking with her was one of the things he enjoyed about being on the team. She made him feel welcome and was an actual friend on a ship full of humans he did not know (and many did not want to know him). Even members of his own species who were on board were not all that friendly towards him. He almost felt like an outsider, a fact that made him appreciate Elise's attentions even more.

Kal'Shayar checked the ship-board time, noticing that it was evening and that Elise would have recently finished her shift on the ship's bridge. She would be in the recreational room at this time, a routine Kal'Shayar had taken note of. It made her easier to find and so now he set off to head to that very room, intent on speaking with her. He had nothing else to do, as he had already worn himself out practicing with some of the other Kig-Yar for most of the day. Winding down with Elise would be a welcome finish to the day.

### 13. Paradise Falls

\*\*Paradise Falls\*\*

February 1st, 2558

The main settlement on Paradise Falls was located in a region that was going through the coldest season, with thin layers of frost having formed on practically every surface. The sky above was overcast, filled with thick and dark clouds that foreshadowed an inevitable rainstorm. The settlement itself, a fairly large town consisting of mostly stone and brick buildings, sat upon a hilled region with sparse forest surrounding it. The majority of buildings were no taller than three floors, but the town hall and museum jutted above them all by being several floors taller. The entire town was deathly quiet, the streets deserted and littered with refuse. Cars had been left abandoned, some with their doors still open and their interiors covered with frost. There was no sign of warfare here; no scorch marks, no bullet holes, nothing. The war had passed this world completely but that had not prevented the citizens from deserting it anyway. The entire evacuation had happened almost overnight, leaving an entire colony empty.

By this time, nature had started to reclaim the land. Weeds grew through the cracked pavement and wild animals roamed freely. Many of the small alcoves on the empty buildings had been adopted as nesting areas for alien birds. The roads had cracked and were becoming overgrown. The entire town had an eerie quality to it, one that became even more pronounced when passing through a more suburban area such as those on the edge of town.

Leon was outfitted in his Operator armour, his sidearm clipped to his waist and an assault rifle gripped in his hands. He was followed by Valerie, who was in a full set of grey Marine armour and was accompanied by about four other similarly outfitted soldiers. They had been deposited in a vacant lot on the edge of the town, a means of ensuring they stayed well out of sight of whatever hostile force was apparently in hiding here, operating from the museum. They had

been making their way through the streets for about ten minutes, keeping quiet and moving in a staggered formation. Leon took a careful survey of his surroundings as he went, noticing the deserted buildings and the dreary, even oppressive atmosphere the entire town had. It seemed odd that everyone here had evacuated so quickly in anticipation for an enemy that had never arrived, but from what he had read the entire thing had been ordered by the local government. Very few had elected to stay. It was unknown what had become of those who had remained behind, but it was likely they had moved out of the area. With the public amenities, such as water and electricity, no longer running there had been little incentive to remain in an empty town.

There was a swing set outside one of the houses Leon walked past. It had rusted in places and creaked in the wind, swinging about slightly. It provided a stark reminder of the life that used to exist here. Leon returned his gaze to in front of him, signalling the team to cross the street, following them as they made their way into a narrow side-street. Their objective was further into town, the museum quite visible over the surrounding structures. It was far larger than most of the other buildings and its front area was made up of several stone pillars and a set of wide steps, giving the entire structure an appropriately 'official' appearance. The same went for the town hall that sat even further into the colony. Leon was constantly looking up at the windows that overlooked the streets, worried that there would be snipers concealing themselves within. If there was a sizeable force of terrorists here, it was likely they would position lookouts around the vicinity of the museum.

General Caine had ordered them to be as low-key as possible when making their way to the museum. They were to engage the enemy when fired upon, but if they could remain undetected then it would give them the element of surprise when they finally did make it to the museum. Leon had mixed feelings about this, as he would have preferred a fast and destructive strike against the terrorists using the air support they had at their disposal. 'Pussy-footing' around was not something he really approved of. However, orders were orders and if the General wanted them to tread more carefully and refrain from going in guns-blazing, then that is what they would do.

He glanced back at Valerie, who had a Marines cap on and a portable green heads-up display that sat over one eye. She gave him a wry smile and he recalled the time they had spent together over the past week, his uncertainties about such a thing having since dissipated entirely. He would have returned the smile, but realized that such an action would be pointless since his face was completely hidden by his helmet and grey-tinted visor.

Returning to face what was ahead, Leon lead the group to a narrow alleyway that ran between two office buildings and went in the general direction of the museum. Stopping there for a moment, he leaned around the corner and peered down the alley, making sure it was clear before starting down it, the team following him in formation.

The alley went on for about one hundred metres, going by a loading area at the back of one of the office buildings. There was an abandoned truck parked here, one door open and frost covering the interior. A gate opened onto the street ahead, with frosted trees lining the sidewalk. The museum sat at the far end of this particular

road. Leon approached the partially opened steel gate and looked around it, directing his gaze towards the museum. There was a town square out the front of the large structure, but someone had set up barricades some distance down the road. There were no visible guards but this was not a sure indication that the area was clear. Leon directed the team to stop for now and carefully stepped past the gate, heading for the cover that one of the nearest trees provided. Using his helmet's built-in binoculars, Leon zoomed in on the barricades.

The barricades in question consisted of several vehicles and a makeshift steel fence. A gate was at the centre of the barricade but was closed. The entire road had been blocked off and Leon was right in assuming that any other road approaching the museum had been similarly barricaded. This left the adjoining buildings as the best means for getting to the town square and the museum.

Leon deactivated his helmet's magnification systems and then motioned to the team to follow. Valerie made her way behind a nearby parked car, staying low as she held her assault rifle at the ready and kept her view trained towards the barricade. The other three Marines, none of which Leon was really familiar with, spread out down the sidewalk, taking cover amongst the trees and deserted vehicles. Leon moved from cover and started down the sidewalk, directing his gaze towards the nearby buildings as he searched for a way inside one of them. There were plenty of windows and doors he could break open, but there was no guarantee any of them would open a way to the town square.

Leon was about to direct Valerie ahead when a shot rang out from somewhere ahead, a white contrail lancing through the air before the round struck the tree near where the Spartan had been standing. The shot had been close, close enough for his personal shield to react to the fragments of wood that erupted from where the shot had impacted. He hit the ground immediately, as did the others, another shot erupting from the unseen gunman and striking one of the Marines in the face. His brains exploded from the back of his head, sending his body tumbling onto the ground, blood pooling around him.

"Bloody hell, there's a sniper!" One of the Marines, a bald man by the name of Gary Morse, had a look of absolute shock on his face as he huddled against the back of a parked vehicle, clutching his rifle to his chest. His accent was noticeably British, hailing from one of the less well-off parts of the country's capital.

Leon peeked around the car he had crouched behind, another shot erupting from a window on one of the buildings near the barricade. It punched through the metal of the car and ricocheted off of the concrete near Leon's feet before embedding itself in a tree trunk. Leon ducked back behind the car but had caught sight of the sniper: it was a Kig-Yar, one of the common ones, and it had been wielding a human-built sniper rifle, namely the S2 Anti-Material rifle. How a bunch of terrorists had acquired such expensive and dangerous weaponry was unknown, but certainly worrying.

Valerie glanced over at the dead Marine, a momentary look of dismay on her face that was quickly replaced by one of gritty determination. Leon considered laying down suppressing fire on the sniper, but there was no way to know if there were any other Kig-Yar terrorists nearby. They could be on their way here right now, as the sniper would have undoubtedly alerted his compatriots.

"I'll cover," Leon said. "Get across the street and into that alley over there." He nodded in the direction of a narrow alley that ran between two buildings across the road. That put several metres of open ground between them and the intended destination, but Leon was counting on being able to disrupt the sniper's ability to get a clear shot at them.

Leaning around the side of the car, Leon opened fire with his assault rifle. The weapon shook in his grip as he sent rounds pounding into the wall around the sniper's position, each shot causing small explosions of brick dust to erupt from each impact zone. Another shot erupted from the Kig-Yar's sniper rifle, but it flew well wide of Leon, an indication that getting shot at was interfering with his accuracy. Valerie and the others began bolting across the street, making it across quickly and without further incident.

Leon paused, his assault rifle empty. He ducked back into cover and ejected the spent magazine, quickly sliding in a new one before considering what to do next. His right hand had started shaking again, so in response to this he tightened the grip on his assault rifle but this only made the weapon shake in his grip. Across the street, Valerie and the others had ducked into the alley. Private Morse had leaned around the side, raising his M392 Designated Marksman Rifle. He fired off a few shots, but could not get a clean line of sight on the sniper at his angle.

Several more Kig-Yar, outfitted in varying sets of coloured armour and padded grey combat suits, appeared in windows of the surrounding buildings. It was as if they had been lying in wait, a possibility that made it clear to Leon that they had walked straight into an ambush. The Kig-Yar in question were a mix of common ones and Skirmishers. The more common-looking ones remained in their vantage points, opening fire with a variety of precision weapons. The Skirmishers, on the other hand, had started climbing down from their vantage points, armed with light weapons including submachine guns and plasma pistols.

Leon motioned to the squad to get moving, with the Kig-Yar above laying down rifle fire on his position. Morse fired off a few more shots with his DMR, cutting down a few of the Kig-Yar up on the building to Leon's right. Valerie lead the group further down the alley, disappearing from sight while some of the Kig-Yar terrorists went in pursuit.

Leon remained where he was, leaning over the top of the car and opening fire on a few of the Skirmishers that had started to move towards him. They were fast, sprinting and rolling out of the way of the incoming fire, with one rushing along his left flank. Leon adjusted his aim, cutting down the Skirmisher with a hail of bullets. A few shots from the enemy collided with his personal shields, causing them to flare up as their power levels became dangerously low. None of these Kig-Yar appeared to have shields of their own, save for a few of the Skirmishers who wore the smaller forearm shields that made scoring hits on them somewhat more difficult.

It seemed typical of his luck to be surrounded by enemy forces and alone. He tried the radio in his helmet but something was interfering with the signal. He was quick to blame this on the terrorists. It was likely they had something set up to jam signals, compounded by the

higher levels of radiation in the planet's upper atmosphere that had prevented any thorough scans of the region. He and the team had gone in mostly blind and were now paying the price. The presence of these terrorists at least proved that the AI was here, or at the very least the people responsible for stealing it in the first place.

Leon's assault rifle had started clicking on empty again. His hands shaking, he pulled a spare magazine from a pouch on his front and went to load it but fumbled it, watching it drop to the floor. He sighed in frustration, his heart pounding in his chest as he bent down onto his knees to grab it but he was interrupted when set upon by one of the Skirmishers. This one was fairly large and muscular, its mouth open wide as it let out an intimidating screech. Leon was forced to drop his assault rifle as he grappled with the alien, noticing that one of its hands clutched a curved foot-long blade that it then tried to swing at him.

He overcame the alien, twisting one of its arms in an awkward fashion, breaking a bone and causing one of its now jagged ends to erupt out of the flesh with a sickening crack. The Skirmisher screeched in pain as Leon wrenched the blade from its grip, causing it to fall into his other hand. Clutching it, he drove the blade into the alien's chest, dark purple blood dribbling out of the wound as he moved the blade across and between the alien's ribs, slicing open an important artery and causing a rather copious amount of blood to pour out. Pulling the blade free and letting the Skirmisher fall to the ground, he watched briefly as it writhed about while its life quite literally bled away. Leon looked up to find another two Skirmishers circling him. There were still a few of the common Kig-Yar up on the rooftop to his right, each wielding a purple Covenant-built 'Carbine'.

Leon held the knife in his left hand while he reached down with his right and grabbed his side-arm, swivelling around as he did so. He was not about to let himself get overwhelmed on his first mission back in the field, so he was going to make sure he took down as many of these aliens as he could.

He raised the pistol and fired, scoring hits on two of the Kig-Yar on the rooftop. One of them fell forwards and tumbled off of the roof, landing with a dull thump on the pavement below, its skull cracking open and splattering purple blood for some distance. The remaining Kig-Yar returned fire, with Leon's personal shields failing as the carbine shots connected with him. The two Skirmishers who had been circling him now charged, but he managed to gun one down before the other one closed the distance.

It grappled with him, forcing the pistol out of his grip with surprising strength. These Skirmishers were fast, perhaps even faster than a Spartan, with each blow Leon gave being deflected (though with obvious strain) by the Skirmisher. In one hand it held an M7 submachine gun, a human weapon, one that it had started firing in their close proximity, rounds pinging off of Leon's helmet before one smashed through his visor, becoming embedded inside the helmet mere centimetres from his head. Pieces of thick, tempered glass cut into his face, causing blood to trickle into his eyes as he stumbled back, heart pounding and hands impulsively going for his face. The Skirmisher took advantage of this and grabbed his armoured form, tearing the helmet off of his head with one hand before bringing the butt-end of its submachine gun into his temple. Leon tried to open

his eyes, but his own blood had filled them, obscuring his vision and making it virtually impossible to keep track of his opponent. The next blow hit him in the head again and he fell to his knees, still conscious though any ordinary human would probably have fallen unconscious by now. His reinforced bones kept him well-protected, but the Skirmisher was determined to beat him into submission, hitting him again and again, bruising his face and causing a nosebleed.

With his head wracked with pain, Leon fell to the side, his back starting to ache again as if in response to all the trauma he was receiving. He fell to the ground and became aware of the fact that several more Kig-Yar had moved towards him, weapons raised as they surrounded him. Even if he could somehow manage to recover his vision and fight in his now dazed state, he doubted he would last very long against the many guns now pointed his way. The Skirmisher who had been beating him ceased for a moment, regarding him with a gloating look on its face before it brought its weapon down onto the Spartan's head once more.

\* \* \*

><p>Kal'Shayar and his squad had been deposited in another part of the town, not too far from the museum but still a distance enough away to not be immediately noticed and shot at. There were about ten of them moving through the narrow paved streets in a staggered formation, with Javal walking on Kal'Shayar's right, holding a carbine in his hands.</p>

There was something unnerving about this deserted town. The silence gave Kal'Shayar a sense of uneasiness, that perhaps they were not supposed to be here. It was all somewhat childish, thinking of things this way and Kal'Shayar was quick to quell any overly superstitious thoughts. He had found the human architecture here to be somewhat less utilitarian than what he had seen on Reach, with most of the buildings built from brick and stone slabs with only some of the houses in the suburban areas being of the more metal prefab variety. Nearly twenty years before, this place would have been full of people going about their lives. Almost overnight that hustle-and-bustle had given way to complete desolation, the citizens having left on transports in anticipation of an imminent Covenant attack. However, space was a vast place and from what Kal'Shayar had read, this world had been missed completely by the Covenant armada. The inhabitants had deserted for no reason, leaving this town intact but empty. The Skirmisher found it almost fascinating, seeing how nature had started taking back the land, with buildings becoming covered in vines and alien birds nesting in the roofs of houses.

There was little noise, save for the occasional whistle of the light breeze as it moved between the buildings and the odd chirrup of a bird. The group had entered a commercial district, with office buildings lining the streets, the signs out the front faded and worn out. Graffiti was on a few walls here and there, with one particular phrase getting Kal'Shayar's attention: ALL GONE. It was certainly fitting, given the nature of the location.

The museum was visible in the distance, towering above the buildings that surrounded it. Even from this distance, Kal'Shayar could see transmitters on its roof, a few of them Covenant in design. It was likely the terrorists had set up their headquarters there, so it was a definite priority that the team reach the structure. As for their

objectives, they were meant to recover the stolen AI and apprehend the ringleaders of the operation. Simply bombing the place would not have sufficed, according to General Caine, as they had no confirmation that the AI was still here. Destroying the museum could destroy any clues as to its location.

They had no means of contacting the ship in orbit from this far into the town, as something was jamming their signals. It was likely one of the transmitters at the museum was responsible, so another objective would be to disable this jammer in order to renew contact with the Vanguard.

As for the terrorists, it was likely they would mostly be Kig-Yar. Kal'Shayar had no qualms killing members of his own species, especially as he knew it would be necessary for this mission. Even so, he hated to see people of his own species fall into committing terrorist acts, especially Skirmishers like himself. Unlike the common Kig-Yar, the Skirmishers acted on a stricter code of honour. Becoming a criminal went sorely against that code, but he knew better than anyone that not all Skirmishers were bothered by this.

The team came to a main street, one that had been barricaded further up ahead. There was a group of guards standing at the barricade, about four of them in total, all common Kig-Yar and armed with a mix of human and Covenant-built weaponry. Kal'Shayar signalled his squad to halt and they moved into cover around a corner, with Javal turning to look at Kal'Shayar with an annoyed gaze.

"We can take them," he said. "A quick, coordinated strike will eliminate them."

"That would alert every other terrorist in the town to our presence," Kal'Shayar said. He eyed Javal sternly, seeing that the hybrid was disappointed with the response. Going in guns-blazing was not the plan, certainly not the one Kal'Shayar had envisioned.

"How many could there possibly be?"

"We have no way of knowing. I would rather we retain the element of surprise for when we strike the museum." Kal'Shayar considered what to do, taking note of the Kig-Yar sniper standing guard on a rooftop near the barricade. There was a lot of open ground between them and the barricade, though there were plenty of buildings to take cover in. Kal'Shayar directed two members of the squad into the nearest one before counting in Javal and one of the females on the team, Siv, into another one of the buildings. Javal looked at Kal'Shayar with disapproval.

"Try and make your way closer to the barricade through the buildings," Kal'Shayar said. "Keep watch and only open fire when I do."

"What are you planning to do?" Javal asked. He stood up while Siv began to make her way to the building's entrance.

"Take them by surprise," Kal'Shayar said. "As quietly as we can manage. And by that, I mean we cannot let them warn their comrades in the town. They have a transmitter at the barricade." He nodded in the direction of the transmitter in question: it was a short pylon of glowing white light that was positioned behind a parked vehicle at

the barricade. The device carried a distinctly Covenant design and Kal'Shayar's experience with such technology in the past made it clear to him what its purpose was. "If you can, Javal, take out the transmitter with your rifle."

Javal stood up and followed Siv into the nearby building. Kal'Shayar handed his carbine to one of the other squad members before he stood up before he directed the rest of the squad to spread out and await his signal to attack. That 'signal' would be him opening fire.

Kal'Shayar moved into the open, a human side-arm clipped to the armour at his waist. He walked towards the barricade, hands held up as the guards there reacted to his approach. They trained their weapons at him but hesitated as he closed the distance, stopping at the barricade. He noticed that the sniper had his beam rifle aimed straight at him, something that would undoubtedly complicate matters.

"Greetings, friends," he said, keeping his hands held up. One of the guards, a clearly agitated female Kig-Yar, approached. She pointed a 'needle' rifle at him threateningly, but Kal'Shayar was barely fazed.

"Who are you?" The female asked sternly, poking Kal'Shayar in the chest with her rifle.

"I am from one of the perimeter patrols," Kal'Shayar lied. He lacked the more rugged outfits these criminals were wearing, but a few of them still had some of their old Covenant armour equipped. He figured he could pass as one of their own. "We were ambushed by a force of human soldiers. I would have reported via radio, but the jamming field around the town prevented me from doing so."

"Uh-huh." The female sounded unconvinced. Kal'Shayar was nonplussed, remaining still but lowering his hands while he took in his surroundings. There were four guards plus the sniper on the rooftop. It was unlikely he could take them all down without the sniper getting a shot off at him. He would have to rely on Javal and the others to cover him. That was a prospect that left some considerable doubt on his mind.

"Our radios are tuned to work through the jamming field," The female said, narrowing her gaze at him. "So, who are you?  
Really\_?"

Kal'Shayar did not answer immediately. Instead, they were all momentarily distracted by the sound of weapons fire erupting from somewhere in the distance, echoing throughout the empty town streets. This was most likely coming from Leon's team and it was the opportunity Kal'Shayar needed.

While the guards had been distracted, if only for a few seconds, Kal'Shayar pulled his pistol free in one fluid and very fast motion. He gripped it in his right hand and fired it straight at the female, planting a bullet right in the centre of her chest. There was a spray of purple blood and she fell backwards, a stunned look on her face.

Immediately Javal and the others opened fire. The Covenant-built

transmitter exploded in a shower of sparks and plasma energy before the Kig-Yar sniper on the roof received a needle rifle shot in the brain. The pink shard exploded, blowing a hole through his skull and causing him to fall forwards and plummet off of the rooftop, landing on the sidewalk with a sickening \_thud!\_

Kal'Shayar was immediately fired upon by one of the other guards. This guard wielded a human submachine gun, the rounds from it spraying by Kal'Shayar as the guard panicked from being caught off-guard. Kal'Shayar quickly ducked and shifted his aim, firing off a shot that caught the terrorist in the neck, dark purple blood erupting forth as a major artery was ruptured. With each heartbeat, blood spurted out in a fountain-like fashion and the Kig-Yar fell to the ground clutching his throat.

The other two guards were wiped out by Javal and the others, receiving a mix of energy weapons fire and that of kinetic weapons. Kal'Shayar clipped his sidearm back to the armour at his waist, still able to hear the sounds of weapons fire from out in the distance.

Most of the other squad members had made their way to the barricade. Kal'Shayar stepped into the small guardhouse that had been set up on the side of the street. It was a typical metal prefab construction and had a single seat inside as a well as a few small metal crates full of guns. Kal'Shayar found a Covenant transmitter device inside, the sort one would wear within their helmet and use to communicate on Covenant frequencies. It was emitting a few different voices, all speaking in the common Kig-Yar language.

\_"A human squad is in Sector Seven,"\_ one of the voices said.

\_"Dispatch teams to intercept."\_ Another voice, undoubtedly one of higher-ups in the terrorist organization, responded with complete calm. He sounded oddly familiar to Kal'Shayar, but it was hard to tell exactly through the static.

Javal stepped alongside Kal'Shayar, regarding the squad leader and then the radio with a curious gaze.

"What exactly were you thinking, Champion?" Javal asked. "Walking up to the barricade like you did?"

"It distracted them and enabled you and the others to move into position," Kal'Shayar said. He clipped the transmitter to his waist armour. It could prove to be very useful for the mission.

"It was reckless." Javal looked at him with some slight trace of amusement visible on his features, his scent belying his elevated mood. "It was something \_I\_ would have done. Why, exactly, are you more qualified than me to lead this squad?"

Kal'Shayar turned to look at him, realizing that Javal was right in regards of it being a reckless move. He was still not quite sure what had compelled him to do it, but it had seemed the better option at the time. It was likely every other approach to the museum building would be barricaded in a similar manner. With this barricade down and most of the other terrorists either unaware of their presence or preoccupied fighting the humans, this team was free to make their way

to the museum.

"I have far more experience than you do," Kal'Shayar said. "Besides, Javal, we have been over this. Arguing with you is getting tiresome."

"Tiresome?" Javal scoffed. "That's amusing. Do I really irritate you that much?"

"I would be lying if I said you were not." This was true, but Kal'Shayar also felt some amusement as he noticed Javal's expression shift to one of annoyance.

Gazing over at the other squad members, Kal'Shayar stepped past Javal and out of the guardhouse. The squad was scattered about near the barricade, keeping watch on the different approaches.

"We will attempt to find the human squad on our way to the museum," Kal'Shayar said. "However, if we can reach the museum while they draw fire, then all the better." It was a somewhat callous statement, as he had nothing against those on the human squad personally, but it was true. They were drawing away the bulk of the enemy force, something that would increase the chances of Kal'Shayar's squad finishing this mission successfully.

As things stood, they had no way of knowing how many hostile Kig-Yar were between them and the museum. Then there would certainly be even more at the museum itself. The mission was far from over, despite this early success at clearing a guard-post.

"What does it matter about the human team?" Javal asked, stepping out of the guardhouse and stopping a short distance from Kal'Shayar. "Let them draw the fire of the enemy."

"If we are in a position to help them, we should do so," Kal'Shayar said. "I am not saying we will go out of our way to help them. Do you understand now, Javal?"

The hybrid nodded. Kal'Shayar directed the squad to move on ahead before falling into step with them. The mission was already proving to be a welcome distraction from his usually mundane life and the woes that had occurred in recent months, but he had no way of knowing just how interesting his day was about to become.

#### 14. Lev'Kanar

\*\*Lev'Kanar\*\*

February 1st, 2558

The museum was a grand building, compared to much of what surrounded it. Much of its displays had been removed during the evacuation nearly twenty years earlier, leaving a great deal of the exhibitions empty. There were still some up, with a few statues scattered about that had been left behind. The newest residents, a sizeable band of Kig-Yar mercenaries and terrorists, had rearranged some of the furniture for their own ends, with some rooms containing weapons caches and sleeping mats.

Leon awoke with a splitting headache, sunlight streaming into his eyes from a skylight in the ceiling high above. His helmet was gone and he presumed it had been lost during the fight, leaving his bruised features exposed. He clenched his jaw, pain shooting through his skull. His eyes stung and dried blood clung to his face, making more subtle movements feel awkward. His back also ached, but he was otherwise in working order. He was sitting on a chair in one of the main exhibition halls, though the display cases here had been moved out of the way and against the walls. In their places were metal crates and portable computers, along with a few Covenant-built transmitters. At the far end was a metal door with a faded 'STAFF ONLY' sign on the front. Leon became aware of the fact that his hands were tied behind the chair and his legs were in a similar state. The chair itself had been hastily melded to the floor, judging by the fact a nearby Kig-Yar was wielding a smoking plasma torch. It seemed he had been taken captive, something that only frustrated him.

He had been expecting better of himself. This was his first mission back into the field and he had already managed to stuff it up. He could rest easy in the fact that the rest of the team had gotten away, at least he had seen this much occur. He could not be certain if that had not changed, as he had no idea how long he had been unconscious. It had seemed unlikely that the Kig-Yar would be the ones to subdue him, as they had been relatively weak when he had fought them during the war. Their strength was not on par with that of a Spartan, yet they had caught him anyway, a telltale sign that he was perhaps not ready to be out here.

There were five of these terrorist types standing around him, weapons trained in his direction. Most were dressed in rugged sets of armour, much of it grey in colour, designed to help them blend better into the urban setting. Some had black goggles on and it was obvious from the green hue they gave off that these visors served as heads-up displays. There was a distinct mix of human and alien weaponry, indicating that they had been forced to acquire arms from whatever source they could. Unlike the more traditionalist Sangheili, the Kig-Yar had proven that they were willing to work with humans, even use their weapons if need be. If Leon's crash course in Covenant history was anything to go by, a great deal of the Kig-Yar population had not been followers of the religion the Prophets had set up. They had simply worked for the Covenant, reaping the economic benefits of being part of such a vast empire. Kig-Yar had become well-known for their piracy and privateering, as well as their occasionally money-grubbing habits.

Leon tested the strong tensile ropes that bound him. He thought he felt some give to them, but breaking free would only be the beginning. There were several Kig-Yar sitting around him, pointing guns at him. With his personal shields deactivated, he knew that he would not last long under combined fire. He decided that, for now, he would remain here and see what happened.

The museum's interior architecture was reminiscent of the old Masonic halls on Earth, though Leon doubted any secret society had been involved in the construction of this building. It was merely for aesthetic appeal, designed to give the place a charm that a lot of newer buildings lacked. There were still signs up promoting what had been the museum's last major exhibition. It concerned early space colonisation, which would have been fitting for a colony such as this, one of the earliest settled of the Outer Colonies. Some of the

display cases that had been moved aside still contained various odds and ends that had been left behind in the evacuation. A thick layer of dust covered much of the displays, with a great deal of it wafting through the air, visible in the streams of sunlight that were pouring in through the skylights and the windows to the left. The curtains had been drawn over most of the windows, with the sunlight from outside giving them a yellow glow. The air within was warm, probably to compensate for the winter temperatures outdoors, but it may also have been to make the current Kig-Yar residents more comfortable. They hailed from warmer tropical climates. Coming to a place like this in the middle of winter had probably not been very comfortable for them.

Leon had never been captured before. During the war, the Covenant had usually killed than take prisoners, especially Spartans such as himself. His kind had developed an almost mystical quality to the Covenant races and, for a time, were referred to as 'Demons', particularly by the Sangheili. That had ended when the war had, though by that time a great deal of the Spartans were dead.

Leon pulled at the ropes around his wrists again. They were made from some rather strong, flexible metal, probably from some Kig-Yar world. One of the Kig-Yar, a Skirmisher, stepped in front of him and pointed a carbine straight into his face. It was the same Skirmisher who had beaten him earlier. This alien shook his head, hoping to dissuade Leon from attempting to escape. The dissuasion worked, for now at least, and Leon quit pulling at the ropes and sat quietly. What were they waiting for?

The Skirmisher stepped to the side, out of Leon's front. Ahead, the metal door swung open loudly, creaking on rusted hinges. There was another Skirmisher standing in the doorway, one dressed in a white and grey set of armour save for a helmet. He wore a thick grey coat over the armour and he stood tall and confident, being somewhat over seven feet in height. He was also very well built, carrying a great deal of noticeable muscle that added bulk underneath his coat. He regarded Leon with what looked like a smile, his sharp teeth showing partially along his snout. There was a scar down the left side of his face, one that stirred up a rather painful memory in Leon's mind. He could not be sure, but this was likely the same Skirmisher who had shot him on New Sanctuary and crippled him.

Leon had to restrain himself from lashing out, especially given his current circumstances. The Skirmisher started walking forwards, his booted heels clacking loudly on the tiled floor, each noise echoing throughout the large room.

"Do you like the place?" He asked, his English sounding surprisingly refined, his voice recognizable. It was definitely the same Skirmisher from New Sanctuary. Leon remained silent, watching as the Skirmisher walked towards him. "I do not mind it myself. It has an odd majestic quality, if you can ignore the copious amounts of dust and refuse that litter the place. I chose it for its location and for the fact it contains a still functioning computer, with a direct line into the UNSC network. It took some doing, but I think we found a way into that network."

The Skirmisher stopped a short distance away, looking down at Leon with a curious gaze.

"How is my English?" He asked. "Some of your words are difficult to pronounce, especially for my species, but I think I have acquired a good grasp of it. The nuances, the colloquialisms...I think I could debate with the best of them."

Leon said nothing. The Skirmisher appeared disappointed by the lack of response.

"Do you know much about my species, Spartan?" The Skirmisher asked. "Unlike the commoners, us 'Skirmishers', or Malav-Yar adhere to a stricter set of rules. At least, I did, until I left the military. We pride ourselves on being honourable, to an extent, giving our foes no mercy and not being so easily consumed by greed like our more common brethren. That may explain why you humans have already struck up relations with the commoners, since you share that drive to earn wealth. As for us..." The Skirmisher gave a very human shrug. "You almost wiped us out in the war. Somehow, I do not think our rulers are going to forgive you for that."

He paused and Leon looked up at him, trying to work him out. It was clear that this Skirmisher was the ringleader of the operation. Why he had brought Leon here was unknown, but it was clear that he had some sort of agenda. Either that, or he simply liked to play games with his enemies and judging from his demeanour so far, Leon would not have put this past him.

"My name is Lev'Kanar. You are Leon, Spartan A-079, a First Lieutenant. You were born on January 25th, 2522. Your parents were killed in 2527 by a Covenant invasion force which bombarded your home colony from orbit. You were off-world at the time and certain individuals within the UNSC saw the potential in you, as you had the genetic traits required for the Spartan-III program. You started training in 2531 and your first proper mission commenced in 2539." Lev'Kanar looked pleased with himself as he recited off this information, clearly having pulled it from some UNSC record somewhere. How he had gotten to those records was troubling, as so far Leon had assumed these aliens were nothing but organized terrorists. Either they had sources with ties to the UNSC or they had somehow hacked into the organization's records.

"I recall what occurred on New Sanctuary," Lev'Kanar continued. "I had thought you had died, but clearly I was mistaken. You are far stronger than I assumed, but I suppose that is one of the traits you Spartans all have: the ability to survive. Much can be said about your species as a whole, surviving the war and being able to regain your strength so quickly. Did you know there are elements in my species' government that thinks you humans are plotting to conquer us? Without the organized Covenant guiding us, we have fractured. Our militaries are disorganized and our fleets a fraction of the strength they used to be. Yet humanity, despite its losses, is as strong as it used to be. You continue to expand, while my race remains content with its own little empire. Why do you think your species does this, Leon?" He paused for a few seconds, before adding, "May I call you Leon?"

The Spartan said nothing. Lev'Kanar seemed to like the sound of his own voice, so Leon assumed it best just to let him talk. He had other things to worry about, mainly getting out of here and taking this smooth-talking Skirmisher with him. Apprehending him alive was preferable for the mission outcome, even if Leon had the urge to snap

the alien's neck with his bare hands.

"I will take your silence as a 'yes'," Lev'Kanar said. He stepped over to an empty chair that sat nearby and pulled it towards him, spinning it about so that it faced Leon. He sat down in it, now level with the Spartan, his yellow eyes peering straight into Leon's own.

"Your species, Leon, is a danger to every race in this galaxy. You are not content to remain in your own corner of space. You would rather spread out until you have enveloped every inch of this galaxy. My species had been in space centuries before yours had even mastered the rocket engine, yet you come onto the scene so late and expect everyone else to bow to your demands. I almost admire your species for its tenacity. And then there are those rumours about your race being the descendants of the very Forerunners themselves! How can one species be so..." He trailed off, trying to think of the appropriate word. "So special?"

There was a pause. Leon got the impression that Lev'Kanar was somewhat unstable, judging from the nonsense he was spewing.

"Leon," Lev'Kanar said, his gaze turning to one that looked like pity (it was hard to tell with an alien). "I know about the treatments you went through. The reconstructive surgeries, the pain they caused for you. The spine is a delicate, yet important, thing. I feel somewhat responsible for what you went through, as I had been the one to fire the shot that caught you right..." He poked Leon in the lower chest, smiling as he did so. "Here. Right there. I remember it as if it was yesterday."

>Leon lunged forwards, or at least tried to, but the high-strength tensile ropes held him on the chair. Lev'Kanar was not at all fazed and let out a raspy chuckle, pleased to see that the Spartan had finally responded in some way. Leon's rage had started to boil over but the best he could do to release it was shoot a steely, cold gaze towards the Skirmisher.<p>

"Do you know why I ordered my soldiers to capture you alive?" Lev'Kanar asked. "I wanted to tell you this, in person. How I feel sorry for what happened to you, what you went through. I had expected you to die, but clearly you did not. And do you know that the good General Caine is not as 'good' as he makes himself out to be?"

>Finally, Leon spoke, his voice laced with anger.<p>

"What the hell do you know?" He barked. Lev'Kanar leaned back in his chair, smug.

"You went through tests to prove that you were fit to return to duty. Did you know that you failed them, particularly the marksman one? I have the results on a computer here, I could show you them if you do not believe me." Lev'Kanar smiled again, especially when he saw Leon's surprised gaze.

"The General put you on the team out of a sense of pity, I would guess," Lev'Kanar continued. "You are one of the few Spartans left, excluding those new and ineffective Spartan-IVs. You are a warrior out of your element, no longer with purpose. The General put you on the team because he felt sorry for you and because he foolishly believes that you can prove yourself better in fieldwork. In essence, he lied to you. He sent you out here, and you were simply not ready."

Lev'Kanar leaned forwards, bringing his head close to Leon's, peering straight into the Spartan's eyes. Leon could smell his breath at this distance. It smelt of fresh meat, as Kig-Yar were mostly carnivores. Eating vegetables was probably alien to them.

"Why do you continue to do what you do?" Lev'Kanar asked. "Why do you keep fighting? The war is over, yet you continue to fight. Have you ever considered settling down, starting a family?"

"It occurred to me...once."

"The war is over, Leon. Go home. I will let you go, if you promise not to pursue me."

>Leon shook his head.<p>

"I can't promise that." There was no way he was going to let an obvious criminal get away.

"Well, I am sorry," Lev'Kanar said, his tone turning solemn. He looked towards the other Skirmisher and nodded. This was obviously the signal for something, since the next thing Leon knew, the ropes holding him were untied and the barrels of about four different guns were pressed into him from different directions.

"Please, do not try to escape," Lev'Kanar said. "It will end very quickly for you, otherwise. And for your friend."

>Leon perked up when he heard this. Lev'Kanar nodded in the direction of a door at the other end, presumably the one he had been brought in from.<p>

"Escort him outside," Lev'Kanar ordered.

Leon was grabbed by the surrounding four Kig-Yar and turned around, weapons trained on him constantly as they started towards the door. Lev'Kanar strode ahead, pushing it open and directing them down a corridor on the right, one that took them to a side entrance. Lev'Kanar pushed it open, revealing the outdoor courtyard beyond. There were tables and chairs scattered about, with a cafe to one side that had been closed since the evacuation. A few Kig-Yar guards stood around the courtyard, with a sniper standing on the roof of the building at the other end, keeping a watch on things from above.

In the centre of the courtyard were some garden beds, frosted off from the winter air. An old-fashioned looking lamp-post was here and so was Valerie Nevas, who was tied to the lamp-post. Leon felt a wave of anger when he saw her. She looked at him, an annoyed look on her face, as if the entire situation was a simple inconvenience to her.

"You came here for the Artificial Intelligence, did you not?" Lev'Kanar asked before he stopped for a moment and turned around to face the Spartan. He reached into a pocket in his coat, retrieving a small data-stick. "You can have it. Not that it will do you much good now." He stepped towards Leon and stuffed the data-stick into a pouch on his armour, giving the Skirmisher equivalent of a smile.

Leon was surprised by this, but did not press the matter. Rather, he was more concerned with Valerie, who was tied up to a post in the middle of the courtyard and in the line of sight of just about every

guard in the area.

"Sergeant Valerie Nevas, an old acquaintance of mine," Lev'Kanar said. The statement confused Leon, but the thought was pushed aside when he was taken to a table about twenty metres from where Valerie was tied up. Lev'Kanar stepped over to the table, taking up one of the human side-arms lying there. It was a civilian model pistol that lacked a scope. Lev'Kanar pulled back the slider, sending a round into the chamber. He then handed it to Leon, who took it and regarded his options. There were too many guards out here and they would cut him down the moment he tried to start something and a similar fate would fall on Valerie. He did not want that. Whatever twisted game Lev'Kanar wanted to play, he would have to go along with it.

Lev'Kanar took up his own pistol, regarding Leon with a menacing smile. Leon thought of planting a bullet between his eyes but knew it would be a mostly pointless endeavour, as there was a good chance that Lev'Kanar was expecting that sort of action. Valerie would be shot to pieces just to spite him if that happened.

"We found Valerie on a nearby street, scouting the perimeter of the museum," Lev'Kanar explained. "At first I thought of simply executing her, considering what happened the last time we crossed paths, but then I realized I could entertain myself with her, for a while. I hear, Leon, that your hands are not as steady as they used to be?" He took up a small porcelain mug from the table, one that had clearly been taken from the nearby cafe. Walking towards where Valerie was tied up, he planted the mug on top of her head. She tilted her head and let the mug slide off, but Lev'Kanar caught it and promptly punched her across the face, a momentary look of anger crossing his features. Leon went to run at him but was grabbed by the Skirmisher standing behind him, who stopped him from going any further.

Valerie recovered from the blow, a small trace of blood trickling from the corner of her mouth. Lev'Kanar's face reverted to its previous smile as he planted the mug on top of her head, ensuring that it was balanced there before turning around and walking back towards Leon.

"Is that uncertainty I see on your face, Leon?" Lev'Kanar asked.

Leon's right hand was shaking again. Lev'Kanar noticed, his grin turning to one of satisfaction.

"Now, how about a little friendly competition?" Lev'Kanar asked. "I will let you both go if you can destroy the cup upon your friend's head without harming her. I am sure a Spartan can manage such a shot, especially at this range?"

Leon was not sure about this. It was likely he would be killed regardless of what he did, but there was the possibility that Lev'Kanar was telling the truth. He seemed sincere, but it was hard to tell with a Skirmisher. There was the unfortunate fact that Leon's skills with a firearm were very much rusty. He stood his ground, the pistol in his right hand as he looked down at it and then back to Valerie.

"What are you waiting for, Leon?" Lev'Kanar asked. "Take too long and

I might just order my soldiers to shoot her. At least with you, there is a chance that both of you will survive." It was clear that he was enjoying this. Leon did not want to give him the satisfaction, but it seemed unlikely he would be able to escape. Both he and Valerie would be cut down, their lives wasted because of some twisted Skirmisher's 'game'.

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><p>Kal'Shayar had used the radio he had found to avoid the patrols out in the streets, bringing his squad to the museum compound's perimeter. They were at the building's rear, where a steel fence had been erected around it in order to keep out unwanted visitors. The building was quite large with multiple floors, though the fence had clearly been built in order to keep out <em>human<em> intruders.

With the squad scattered amongst cover behind him, Kal'Shayar took note of some of the broken windows on the second floor. He turned around to look at Javal, who was crouched a short distance behind him. They were taking cover in a parking lot, using the deserted vehicles as cover, while Kal'Shayar took note of the guards on patrol outside of the fence.

"Javal, I want you to take half of the squad around to the other side," Kal'Shayar said. "Create a diversion. This will allow me and the others to enter the rear."

Javal frowned, but there was no arguing against an otherwise sound plan.

"Of course, Champion," Javal said, glancing at the rest of the squad. He pointed to five of the squad members in turn before heading out of the parking lot with them, rushing along the compound's perimeter, moving from cover to cover.

Skirmishers were capable of jumping great heights and distances, but for Kal'Shayar this was something he had not done for a long time. He looked up at the row of windows at the second floor, taking note of how a few were smashed open. It should be a relatively simple task of getting up there and climbing inside.

There were a few guards at the base of the building, beyond the fence ahead. Kal'Shayar signalled to his half of the squad to spread out and lay down covering fire before he emerged from cover and closed the distance between him and the fence. The guards there saw him but were engaged by the other squad members, allowing Kal'Shayar to jump the fence. It was not too difficult and he scrambled up its length quickly, landing on his feet at the other side. Pulling out his pistol, he fired at the guards up ahead. They had since scattered as his squad opened fire, with two of them being cut down and leaving another two taking cover behind the stone pillars outside the rear entrance.

Kal'Shayar emptied the magazine in his sidearm before he reloaded and put the weapon back into its holster, staying low as he started for the wall directly beneath one of the broken second floor windows. With the guards preoccupied and being forced back into the building, Kal'Shayar was free to attempt to scale the wall. Utilizing the power in his digitigrade legs, he jumped, covering most of the distance

before putting out his hands and grabbing the bottom of the window. For a moment, he hung there, heart thumping in his chest, before he pulled himself through the window, hitting the floor on the other side before rolling to absorb the impact. He ended up back on his feet, pistol drawn as he regarded the room he had found himself in.

It was a dusty room that was full of cardboard boxes, most of them empty. Cobwebs hung near the ceiling and the floor was littered with paper refuse. The door was locked from the outside, so with a heave Kal'Shayar forced it open, stepping into the carpeted hallway beyond. There were a few doors space along this hallway, each leading into an office. No guards were here, oddly enough, and so he made his way down the corridor without meeting resistance. Stopping by a door at the end, he slowly pushed it open, ending up in one of the exhibition rooms. Most of the display cases had been moved out of the way, pushed up against the walls in order to make room for the metal crates and sleeping mats set up about the room. Ahead was a set of stairs leading down a floor, taking him straight into an even larger room full of crates and computers. Cables snaked across the floor, connecting the various machines together. Approaching a metal table by one of the larger terminals, Kal'Shayar found several data-pads, most human in design. Picking one up, he found that it displayed information concerning the current locations and security measures protecting certain high-ranking human officials. It was the sort of information General Caine would certainly want to see.

Kal'Shayar continued down the large room, passing through an open set of double doors. His sensitive hearing picked up on the sounds of voices coming from outside somewhere, so he began to slowly make his way towards them. He came to a metal door, pausing by it as he pushed it open a crack and peered through.

Beyond was an open courtyard area, with tables and chairs scattered about. It had clearly once been used as an eating area for museum visitors, but right now the only patrons out here were armed Kig-Yar guards. Leon was there, with one of the female human marines tied to a post some distance away. Kal'Shayar saw the Skirmisher talking to Leon and felt a wave of surprise and dismay wash over him when he recognized who it was.

Lev'Kanar, he thought. The son he had once presumed to be dead, only for him to arrive back at home months ago with promises of being able to save Jeril. Now he was here, engaged in the criminal activity his father had been certain he had been involved with. This only confirmed his fears. Kal'Shayar pushed the door open a bit further, noticing that there were several Kig-Yar standing about, most pointing their weapons at Leon. There was a sniper on a roof of the building across the courtyard who was probably the most immediate threat to Kal'Shayar.

He figured his squad would be on its way, if they were not too tied up fighting elsewhere. However, he knew he would need to act soon, considering what he could see playing out before him.

There was a shout from behind him and he turned around. Two Kig-Yar guards had walked around the corner and seen him, both of whom had raised their weapons. Kal'Shayar reacted quickly, bringing up his pistol and opening fire, shooting both but not before they fired off a few shots of their own. One round caught Kal'Shayar in the left

arm, sending a hot, stinging pain through it before the bullet punched through the door behind him. He stumbled backwards and fell through the door, ending up in the courtyard much to the surprise of everyone out there.

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><p>When Kal'Shayar barged through the door and the shooting started, Leon seized his opportunity. Lev'Kanar looked surprised for a moment as Leon elbowed the other Skirmisher, the one who had been standing guard a short distance behind him, causing the alien's head to snap back painfully and dark purple blood to fly out of its mouth. He then grabbed the alien and held him in front of him as two of the other guards nearby opened fire with plasma pistols, the bolts of green energy burning into the Skirmisher's torso as Leon held him in front of himself like a shield.</p>

Leon shot both guards with the sidearm Lev'Kanar had so helpfully provided him with. He turned around to face Lev'Kanar, but the Skirmisher was fast, firing a shot that went through the other Skirmisher's skull before passing through and narrowly missing Leon's own head. The Spartan dropped the dead alien and went to raise his pistol towards Lev'Kanar, but the young Skirmisher punched the arm away. Ahead, Leon could see the sniper trying to get a clean shot but with Lev'Kanar now grappling with him, taking a shot would not have been a safe course of action.

Lev'Kanar was surprisingly strong and very fast, raising his own pistol only for Leon to punch the arm aside, causing the shot to go wide. Lev'Kanar did the same as Leon went to raise his gun and the shot missed completely, hitting one of the other guards instead and sending him falling backwards into a table, knocking the entire thing over.

Lev'Kanar did a backwards roll at that point, allowing the remaining guards an open line of fire on Leon. The Spartan dived to the ground, his gaze going to Valerie. She was out in the open, though not a real threat to the Kig-Yar, but nonetheless Leon made it his priority to free her. Looking to his left, he saw two of the other guards who had been behind him. They were close, certainly close enough for aiming to be a secondary factor, allowing Leon to fire from his awkward position on the ground. Both guards fell but their weapons remained out of reach.

Kal'Shayar, meanwhile, he dived for cover behind the counter of the cafe. Three of the Kig-Yar guards scattered throughout the courtyard had turned their attention towards him, bullets and plasma bolts colliding with the cafe. Glass cases smashed and a dusty coffee machine exploded, pinning the Skirmisher behind the counter. He stuck his pistol over the top of the counter, firing a few shots in the general direction of one of the guards. None of them hit but it was enough to cause the guard to duck into cover behind one of the raised garden beds.

Leon rolled under one of the tables as the sniper ahead opened fire, sending a beam rifle shot zooming through the air. It missed Leon by a few inches, punching through the metal table and leaving a smouldering hole in its wake. With the civilian pistol, Leon took aim and fired a few shots, none of which connected with the sniper. One of them struck the roof near the Kig-Yar marksman, causing a small

explosion of roof-tile fragments. The sniper ducked but returned fire, another shot shearing a leg off of the table and causing the whole thing to topple onto the Spartan. Leon pushed it off of him with one hand, emptying the four more shots left in his pistol's magazine in the sniper's general direction. Again, none of them connected. He realized he would be better off with an automatic weapon, or maybe even a shotgun, considering how bad his aim had gotten. Maybe Lev'Kanar had been right: he had been sent out here and simply was not ready.

Kal'Shayar reloaded his pistol, noticing a fallen guard a short distance away, one who had dropped a Covenant carbine. Rising to his feet, he resumed shooting at the three guards ahead, gunning one down with a well-placed shot to the chest before diving towards the dropped carbine, grabbing it with both hands and rolling. He opened fire as soon as he rolled back onto his feet, sending the green streaks of energy straight into another one of the guards, punching a few holes through him before watching him fall. He swivelled about and turned his attention towards the sniper, using the carbine's scope to get a better view of the target. The sniper had been preoccupied with Leon, but when he saw Kal'Shayar aiming towards him he began to shift his aim, moving to line up a beam rifle shot onto the Skirmisher.

Kal'Shayar was quicker on the trigger, sending a carbine shot straight into the sniper's throat. The sniper stumbled before falling backwards, hitting the tiled roof before slowly sliding down the gentle incline. Several seconds later, the sniper's lifeless corpse had slid off of the roof completely, landing on top of a bench on the ground below, denting the steel bench and splattering purple blood across its length.

Leon rose to his feet, rushing towards Valerie and quickly untying her. She smiled at him while Kal'Shayar surveyed the area, looking out for any further guards. Lev'Kanar emerged from cover, his pistol raised as he pointed it towards his father.

"Father, how wonderful it is to see you again!" His smile beamed widely, belying a more sinister intent. Kal'Shayar pointed his carbine towards his son but did not take the shot. He did not wish to kill his own flesh and blood, certainly not like this. Though he had disowned Lev'Kanar years before, he still felt some connection to the younger and did not find the thought of killing him particularly appealing.

"You will come with us," Kal'Shayar said, his tone even.

"Come with you? Just so I can be locked up and interrogated?" Lev'Kanar scoffed, his finger moving over the trigger on his pistol. By now, Leon and Valerie had turned to face him, with Leon raising his pistol. However, Valerie stopped him, using one hand to force him to lower the weapon.

"It's probably better if we take him alive," she said.

Lev'Kanar clearly had the intention of shooting, but Kal'Shayar did it first. He sent a green carbine beam into the weapon his son clutched. It flew out of his grip and Lev'Kanar pulled back the affected hand with a pained grimace. The pistol itself had been reduced to a smouldering wreck, landing some distance away and

wafting smoke, the smell of molten gunmetal reaching their nostrils. Seizing the chance, Kal'Shayar charged towards his son and turned his carbine around in his hands. He brought the butt-end of the weapon down onto Lev'Kanar's face, causing him to fall backwards from the force of the blow, dark purple blood seeping from a new cut that opened on his snout. Turning the weapon back around, Kal'Shayar pointed the barrel squarely at Lev'Kanar's head. Sitting up slowly, Lev'Kanar used one hand to wipe away the blood that had started to dribble from one part of his mouth, fingering a now loosened tooth while he was at it. He did not look too bothered by what had just happened and instead glanced up at his father, frowning when he saw the weapon pointed at him.

"You just cannot bring yourself to kill me, can you, father?" He asked.

Kal'Shayar said nothing. For now, he could rest easy in the fact that the mission had been completed and the apparent ringleader of the terrorist organization apprehended. The fact that the ringleader was his son only made him feel disappointed, as he had always expected better of his own children. Lev'Kanar was the last in their bloodline and once he and Kal'Shayar were gone, their clan would come to an unceremonious end. That was perhaps one reason why Kal'Shayar did not wish to kill his son, though what would become of him now? A life in prison was not much of a life at all. Regardless, the elder Skirmisher stayed his hand and did not shoot.

## 15. The Prodigal Son

\*\*The Prodigal Son\*\*

February 1st, 2558

In the main security room on the destroyer Vanguard, things were relatively quiet. The atmosphere was subdued, with each person here attempting to take in the seriousness of the current situation. Leon, having cleaned himself up and put on a fresh uniform after the mishap on Paradise Falls, had sat himself on a chair near the main terminal. He watched as General Caine regarded the surveillance feeds there, a cigar jutting from one corner of his mouth. He would occasionally take a few puffs from it, his gaze one of intensity. Nearby, Elise sat near another computer terminal, swivelling about on her chair as she awaited more orders. They all knew how serious things had become, but Caine was yet to comment on it properly and was instead more focussed on the prisoner they had in the brig. He watched this prisoner through the surveillance feeds they had coming from the cell, with Lev'Kanar visible in the feeds as he paced the room, his hands clasped behind his back.

Taking him alive had been a mistake in Leon's view. Lev'Kanar was dangerous and had almost succeeded in killing both him and Valerie. It was frustrating, to have gotten captured, but it had been somewhat unavoidable considering the circumstances. Leon had never spoken to any Kig-Yar up until recently and he had never thought that they could be so scheming, considering them the most animalistic of the former Covenant races. He had been wrong, since Lev'Kanar displayed a degree of sophistication, judging from his formal use of English. He also was just as intelligent as any normal human being, perhaps slightly more so in some regards. The Skirmisher was dangerous and in

the brief one-on-one fight Leon had had with him down on the planet's surface, they had been almost equally matched. It had surprised the Spartan, as Kig-Yar had never been terribly strong physically. Perhaps his lack of experience against Skirmishers had something to do with this, as they were clearly a lot stronger than their more common brethren. They were also a lot faster too, so if a fight was not going their way it was a simple enough matter for them to jump or roll out of the way in order to give themselves breathing room for another course of action. Sangheili had always been the ultimate opponents to Spartans, but it seemed that this particular Skirmisher was very much on par as well. Considering his muscular frame and height of nearly seven feet, it seemed likely that Lev'Kanar had all the strength and speed of a Spartan but was even more cunning.

Elise had been fiddling for the last few minutes, having the data-stick Lev'Kanar had handed Leon clasped in one hand. They had no reason to believe it was the AI they had come here to recover, so Elise was yet to stick it into the computer terminal and check. Caine seemed more concerned with the prisoner and continued to watch him on the monitors. Lev'Kanar had been pacing around his cell for the last half an hour, having said nothing since his capture. Leon supposed there was little for him to say, now that his terrorist operation had been thwarted. Whatever he was planning, and it had something to do with High Command, had been ruined. They had recovered several sensitive documents that the Skirmisher had somehow acquired for himself, most of them concerning the identities of those in High Command and their current whereabouts, as well as the extent of their security.

Leon still had a few things on his mind, notably why Caine had put him on the team after failing his tests or why the General had found it necessary to lie to him about the subject. So far he had kept quiet, waiting for the appropriate time to direct the question to him. Right now, he looked preoccupied, focussed on the prisoner and whatever he entailed. There was still a lot to be done, including transporting the prisoner to a proper detainment facility. Leon found it unlikely that Lev'Kanar had much to tell them and that was if he would be willing to tell them it. Chances are, he would need to be put through some of the harsher interrogation techniques in order for him to spill the beans. That would take time, time Leon thought would be wasted on such an endeavour.

As for Valerie, who he had freed before any real harm could come to her, she was in her quarters on the ship taking a well deserved rest. Leon was still a bit confused over what Lev'Kanar had meant when he had noticed Lev'Kanar's apparent familiarity with Valerie. Had the two met before? It seemed possible, but it was unlikely they would have recognized each other. Valerie certainly had not known him.

Caine turned around, taking the cigar from his mouth and subsequently blowing out smoke. He regarded Leon, sensing that there was something on his mind (or perhaps more than just one 'something'). After the team had arrived back on board, Caine had reviewed their findings for several minutes before sending a message to High Command about them. Leon had assumed it was just the usual report of what had occurred, but judging from Caine's expression it seemed that there was more to it.

"This Lev'Kanar," he said, after a pause, "He's dangerous. I'm still

waiting on a response from High Command, which shouldn't take long using the new slip-space probes, but I'm expecting they'll call an emergency meeting about this."

"Why would they do that?" Elise asked from where she sat, raising an eyebrow in an inquisitive manner.

"Commander, this alien was in possession of very sensitive documents," Caine replied, sounding surprised at what he perceived to be ignorance. "The sort that are buried behind multiple firewalls and other security systems. Unless this Lev'Kanar guy has informers in high places or the means of hacking directly into our network, then he really should not have been able to acquire these files. They detail just about everything about the security in place around the officials in High Command. We're lucky we got him when we did, otherwise he could have caused a great deal of damage with that information."

Leon leaned back in his chair, giving this some thought. There were still unanswered questions, such as how Lev'Kanar had acquired such sensitive information, but he supposed that the answers would be revealed once they interrogated the Skirmisher.

"Commander, I want you to find out what's on that data-stick. If it is the AI then you'd best run a complete diagnostic of its code."

"Are you sure that's wise, sir?" Elise asked, tucking the data-stick into a pocket on the front of her uniform. "It could be a virus."

"Which is why you're going to use one of the un-networked computer terminals on the lower decks. Be sure to enlist the help of some of the technicians on board as well."

"Of course, sir." Elise rose out of her seat and turned around, leaving the room.

Caine turned his attention to Leon, taking a drag on his cigar as he regarded the Spartan carefully.

"What the hell happened down there, Lieutenant?" He asked, narrowing his gaze. "I want to hear it from you, not through some dry written report."

"What do you think happened?" Leon asked. He thought of delivering the question concerning his failed tests, but decided to wait until a more appropriate time, whenever that would be. He doubted there would ever be an 'appropriate time' for a question like that.

"From what I gather, we lost a few Marines and almost lost you and Kal'Shayar as well," Caine said. "One of the Marines, a Private Morse, was found wounded in a street. He's in the infirmary and is in a stable condition, but I would like to know: what happened to you, Lieutenant? How did your squad become separated?"

"We were ambushed," Leon replied, saying it matter-of-factly. "I stayed behind to cover the escape of my team. That's when I found myself surrounded and had the crap beaten out of me by few aliens." Parts of his face was cut and bruised from all that had occurred. A

bandage covered up a nasty gash that was on his forehead. His back ached, as it so often did, causing him to further lean back in an attempt to get more comfortable in his chair.

"I think it was likely that Lev'Kanar and his people had surveillance devices planted around the streets," Leon said. "They knew where we were and when, despite doing our best to remain undetected."

"And that's when you were taken to Lev'Kanar?"

"Yes, sir. He seemed to know me pretty well, despite only having met once before."

"You knew him?"

Leon nodded. Caine looked surprised but said nothing, allowing Leon to continue.

"He was the same one who shot me down back on New Sanctuary and crippled me. I recognized him and he seemed to know me. He had an unsettling knowledge of my past, as if he had been through my records."

"What could you infer of his character, from your talk with him?" Caine asked, genuinely curious. It was important they learn as much as they could about their prisoner, as it would no doubt help in the inevitable interrogation.

Leon paused, giving the matter some thought. It was sometimes difficult to read what a Skirmisher was thinking when they spoke as their facial expressions and body languages were somewhat different to that of a human, but Leon thought he had gotten a decent grasp of what kind of character Lev'Kanar was.

"He likes to play with his victims," Leon finally said. "Instead of simply killing me, he forced me to take part in some 'game' of his. He had Valerie tied up and had put a cup on her head, handing me a pistol and telling me to shoot it off without harming her." He paused again, shaking his head. "If it hadn't been for Kal'Shayar's intervention, I probably would have killed her as a result of this 'game'."

"I doubt it, Lieutenant," Caine said. "I think you're better than you give yourself credit for."

"Bullshit." This statement struck Caine by surprise, but Leon felt strongly about the matter, enough for him to border on insubordination. "You lied to me, about those tests. I failed them, didn't I? It wouldn't surprise me. I've been off my game for so long and the fact that I actually got captured today is telling enough. I couldn't shoot the broad-side of a barn, unless you gave me a shotgun. I would have been forced into shooting Valerie, all for Lev'Kanar's twisted enjoyment."

Caine was silent for a moment as the surprised grimace he wore disappeared from his face and was replaced with a more rigid look.

"I think, Lieutenant, that you're missing the point," he said. "I put you on the team because I saw your potential. I hated seeing a

Spartan wasting away in a hospital, so I took you out as soon as I thought you were ready. Your tests results were certainly sub-par, but the fact is tests like that can never accurately predict what one will be like out in the field. The fact that you succeeded in your mission today proves this. You delivered us Lev'Kanar, one of the most dangerous terrorists known to us."

Leon said nothing. He found the whole thing placed an underlying sense of distrust to the General. He may have had his reasons, but Leon had had no right to be sent out on some important mission like he had. So many other things could have gone wrong, but luck had made sure they had not. He knew better than to rely on luck alone.

"You should be happy, Lieutenant. The mission was a success. The terrorist is in our custody and his plans will never be carried out. Pull off another success like this and I may just promote you."

Caine was clearly just trying to make the Spartan feel better about himself. Oddly enough, it was working to a degree. Leon felt somewhat more confident in his abilities, even if those abilities were not as top-notch as they had once been.

"I think it would have been best if we had killed him," Leon said bluntly. "If this Lev'Kanar is as dangerous as you say he is, then I'd rather see him dead."

"And I think you're letting your personal want for vengeance get in the way of your view of the bigger picture," Caine countered. "You said Lev'Kanar was the one who almost killed you on New Sanctuary and I can believe that. However, that doesn't mean we should just kill him, not when he could know things that would be of immeasurable assistance to our cause. It's not like he can escape. Even if he somehow got out of that cell, there would be nowhere for him to go. We're in space, not even in orbit of Paradise Falls anymore."

"Then you should just throw him out of an airlock."

"Lieutenant, I understand your displeasure with having him on board but it is necessary. Killing him would just be a waste." Caine took another long drag on his cigar at that point, before continuing: "I think that Lev'Kanar is merely the tip of the iceberg. He might not even be the ringleader of these terrorists, merely a lower-tier commander. We can't be certain, which is why he needs to be interrogated. As for where we'll be taking him, I can't be certain until High Command calls back. We should get a response from them soon, as those new slip-space probes are very fast. Until then, we're on a course back into Inner Colonies space."

Leon said nothing in response to this and simply sat quietly. His gaze went to the surveillance feeds ahead, where about three different cameras watched on the brig from differing angles. Lev'Kanar had stopped pacing his cell and had gone to the small bunk in the corner, lying upon it and closing his eyes. He was still dressed in his grey padded armour suit and coat, one that gave him a rather official-looking appearance and was oddly fitting on the alien, making him look far more imposing than he actually was. Leon could see that he was not properly asleep and was clearly ready to spring into action at a moment's notice, his eyelids occasionally twitching to reveal this.

"There was another thing I noticed," Leon said, getting Caine's attention again. "About Lev'Kanar, I mean."

"What was it?"

"It was as if he knew Sergeant Nevas. Do they know each other?"

Caine was silent for a moment. His expression turned to a thoughtful one.

"Perhaps you would be better off asking the Sergeant about that?"

Leon nodded. Maybe he would be. Since he was fairly certain he and Valerie were very close friends now, it would not be hard to persuade her to tell him about whatever history she had with Lev'Kanar.

\* \* \*

><p><span>February 4th, 2558<span>

There had been little incentive for Kal'Shayar to pay a visit to his son, who now resided in the brig. He had spent the last few days on board, as the ship travelled back into Inner Colonies space, in order to try and make sense of the current situation. He had assumed his son was dead prior to his untimely visit on Sauem months. Now he felt almost ashamed, his son no more than a terrorist and destined to be interrogated by the humans. Hardly anyone on board knew that Lev'Kanar was his son, save for the few on the team, including those who had accompanied him down to Paradise Falls.

Kal'Shayar had been quite comfortable pretending Lev'Kanar was not on board, spending most of his time practicing his fighting skills in one of the training rooms and talking with Elise, who seemed as friendly to him as ever. He had not mentioned his connection to Lev'Kanar to her, but she seemed to be aware of it anyway, presumably through the General's knowledge of the younger Skirmisher. Javal and the others had said little about it, probably well aware of the type of response they would get if they used it as a subject of insult.

Kal'Shayar had awoken this morning with his mind filled with conflicting thoughts. It seemed likely he would never be at rest until he spoke with Lev'Kanar, despite his reluctance to do so. For all intents and purposes, Lev'Kanar had stopped being part of the family when he had left Sauem several years ago. Now he was here, on board this ship, locked away like the criminal he was. Kal'Shayar did not wish to give him the satisfaction of a visit, but it seemed inevitable, especially as he still contained a father's love for the unruly son, the sort that could never really be quelled. He would never be rid of it and part of him did not want to be rid of it. He sometimes wondered where he had gone wrong in raising Lev'Kanar, but he could never be sure as to what had attributed to his son's rebellious nature. All children went through it at one point, though for Lev'Kanar that rebellious phase had gone out of control. He had gone through training for the military, even had a year or two in the service, but then he had left and gotten into a life of piracy and smuggling. It was a disgrace to their clan, not that there was much

of a clan left. Kal'Shayar and Lev'Kanar were the only two that remained and Lev'Kanar had stopped being part of their clan the day he had left Sauem.

Kal'Shayar had dressed into his under-suit and orange armour, leaving the helmet off as he made his way through the ship. The hum of the engines was audible in the background, with the occasionally clunk of automatic doors opening and closing ringing out from places nearby. It was somewhat easy to navigate these human ships as many shared similar design layouts, with the bridge nearly always being towards the front of the ship and engineering at a lower point towards the rear. Kal'Shayar found his way to the security control room. It was where the ship's security was organized, and this included distribution of weapons to personnel as well as the centre for interior ship surveillance. Serena, the Spartan-II, was here. She stood regarding the surveillance feeds.

She turned around when Kal'Shayar walked in and watched the alien with a careful gaze. There were two other people here, both ship security personnel. One stood guard by the door that lead into the brig area while another sat at a desk at a computer terminal. This one occasionally looked up at the surveillance feeds in order to make sure things were in order.

"Kal'Shayar," Serena said in her usual dispassionate manner. "Do you need anything?"

"I only wish to see the prisoner," Kal'Shayar replied. Serena nodded, walking towards him. She picked up a scanning device from the desk to her left, running it over Kal'Shayar while he stood and waited.

"You're not carrying any weapons, are you?" She asked.

"No. Is it not clear that I am unarmed?"

She nodded, putting the scanner aside, satisfied with the results.

"You can go through. Keep in mind that we'll be watching you, and listening."

Kal'Shayar nodded in acknowledgement. He was not particularly fond of the Spartan-II, finding her severely lacking in personality. She was hard to read and her scents were far too difficult to pick up on compared to the other humans. It was perhaps one reason why he had taken to Elise as much as he had: she was very easy to read, both from the way she looked and the changes in her scent. There were those reasons, and the fact that she was probably the only real 'friend' he had on board the ship.

He made his way to the door that lead into the brig area. The guard standing there swiped a card through a slot in a panel by the door, causing it to slide open. Behind was a fairly wide room, with some open space between the door and the actual cell itself. The cell in question was of a modest size, with a front comprised of thick glass and a door that was set within and off to one side. The door was comprised of thick metal, with a small hatch in the middle that would be opened in order to deliver meals to the prisoner within. The thick glass was nigh unbreakable and had thin wire meshed

within.

Lev'Kanar sat on the bunk inside the cell, his head low and his clawed fingers clasped together in front of him, as if in prayer. Kal'Shayar walked towards the glass, standing a short distance in front. There were small microphones built into the walls around that would allow them to hear each other through the glass.

Kal'Shayar put a hand on the cold glass, tapping it with one finger gently. This noise was enough to cause Lev'Kanar to look up, unclasping his hands and rising from the bed. He had since taken off his coat, having splayed it across the floor in the corner. The outfit he wore underneath was a fairly loose fitting and padded set of casual gear with a militaristic bent. It was dirty in places, particularly the trousers and boots he wore. He had had much of his personal items confiscated and that included the blades he had carried, as well as a holographic recording of his family which was now locked up in a cabinet somewhere out in the security control room.

It was almost frustrating to see his son locked up like this and even more frustrating to think of the reasons for his imprisonment. Seeing him like this simply reminded Kal'Shayar of all the mistakes he had made in the past and what could have been, had he done things differently.

"Father," Lev'Kanar said, his voice sounding a little muffled through the glass and microphones.

Kal'Shayar was not sure what he should say, as he had already expressed his disappointment to his son in the past. In fact, Kal'Shayar was not even sure why he had come here, other than to put his mind at ease.

"I know what you are thinking. You want to know why I did what I did. You want to know where you went wrong in raising me. There are no solid answers to those questions." Lev'Kanar looked at him through the glass, his gaze slightly narrowed but confident. "It has been a few days since I was imprisoned here, yet you choose to see me now? I was beginning to wonder if you would ever pay a visit to your only son."

"I do not think you are worthy of being my son, Lev'Kanar." Kal'Shayar said this in a level tone, noticing a slight twinge of annoyance cross his son's features.

"Not 'worthy'?" Lev'Kanar scoffed. "What kind of talk is that? Who do you think you are? Who are you to say who is 'worthy' and who is not?" Though it was clear he was angry, he was controlling the emotion very well. With the glass blocking them physically, it was hard for Kal'Shayar to detect his son's scent and get a more in-depth indication of what he was feeling.

"I was always under your shadow, father," Lev'Kanar continued. "I was told again and again, not just by you but nearly every one of our people I met, that I would have to follow in your footsteps and become as great and as noble a warrior as you were." Lev'Kanar added a mocking emphasis on the words 'great' and 'noble', unable to take them seriously in regards to his father. "I never felt quite adequate enough for you, father. It was a lot easier to leave home and enter

the very profitable field of arms smuggling, especially after the war ended. There were a lot of weapons lying around and a lot of rogue factions looking to arm themselves."

"You profited on the suffering of others," Kal'Shayar said. "That is despicable. How can you rest easy at night when you know that there are innocent lives being lost all because of weapons you have supplied?"

"Innocent?" Lev'Kanar laughed. It was a laugh that unnerved Kal'Shayar, one he had rarely heard his son do, especially in regards to such a topic. "No one is innocent, father. Not me, not you. Everyone is guilty, everyone has sinned. The sooner you come to accept that, the easier it is to sleep at night." He paused, a slight smile creeping up his snout, his sharp teeth showing partially. "You dream every night, father. Nightmares about what you did in the war. Your comrades dying around you. The people you killed, some of them innocent civilians."

"It was war."

"A war that has ended, yet now you find yourself being dragged into the next one. I know what you are thinking, father. You think that by removing me from the picture, handing me over to the humans, you will be able to return home content that you helped protect the peace. You have no idea about what is happening and what will happen."

"Perhaps you could explain?" Kal'Shayar asked, not that he expected a straight answer. It seemed likely that they would have to interrogate Lev'Kanar in order to get some proper information. Knowing his son, Kal'Shayar doubted Lev'Kanar would talk willingly. He would probably die before giving up any information. There was still no clear indication that Lev'Kanar had been in charge of the whole operation. He may have been giving the orders on Paradise Falls, but there may have been others even higher than him who were calling the shots.

"Father, you must take me for a fool," Lev'Kanar said, somewhat mockingly. "I know you are friends with these humans. You never had your heart set in the war and would have preferred to make friends, rather than enemies. Just how far will you go in this new friendship you have formed? Or what of that..." He paused, closing his eyes for a moment, one hand going against the glass. He seemed to be concentrating on something. Kal'Shayar watched as his son opened his eyes, a smile creeping onto his face.

"I recall it now, from the files I recovered. Elise McGillon, human female. Your good General and his friends have already been formulating records since you joined their team. They have been watching you, taking notes of your interactions with the others. You are friends with this woman. A surprise, to be sure. I never thought the humans would willingly befriend any one of us."

"What are you implying?" Kal'Shayar asked. He was startled at just how much his son knew of what had been going on, yet it seemed likely that the General had been keeping tabs on the team members. Perhaps Lev'Kanar's knowledge of the team went a lot further than he had suspected.

"I only find it interesting that you have seemingly formed a bond

with this human. How far is it going to go, father?" Lev'Kanar had opened his eyes, his gaze going straight into his father's eyes. "This could very well be a conflict of interests. As much as I would love to tell you about what I have been planning, father, I know you would tell the humans, especially this 'McGillon' one. Part of me wishes you would willingly join my cause."

"What cause? What are you fighting for?"

"What are you fighting for, father?" Lev'Kanar took his hand off of the glass, his tone turning into a questioning one. "Yourself? Were you really contemplating suicide after Jeril died?"

"No." Kal'Shayar knew this was a lie. The thought of continuing in his lonely existence on Sauem had not been an appealing one in the wake of his daughter's death.

"You are a very terrible liar." Lev'Kanar still had that smile on his face. "I had the means to save her, father. I have the means to save us all. Yet your distrust of me, your disappointment in me, prevented you from accepting my offer. And you have no real way of knowing whether I am telling the truth. I could have saved her, yet you will never know for sure."

"Could you have saved her?" Kal'Shayar asked. He wanted to know, if only to put his mind at ease.

"Yes."

"How?" Kal'Shayar got the impression that Lev'Kanar was telling the truth. It was only a feeling he got, one he could not be completely certain of, but it was there nonetheless.

"Telling you would ruin the surprise." Lev'Kanar backed away from the glass and turned around, walking across the cell before sitting down on the edge of the bed. Kal'Shayar leaned forwards, putting his hands against the glass, looking at his son, his mind abuzz with the possibilities.

"You're lying," Kal'Shayar snapped angrily. "You enjoy this. I can see it in your eyes. You want to see your father suffer. Why?"

Lev'Kanar's gaze was a more dispassionate one now. He looked towards his father, raising an eyebrow ridge.

"I may or may not be lying," Lev'Kanar said. "You will never know for sure. As for 'why'..." He trailed off, pausing for a moment as he gave the question some careful thought. "I fight for the future of our species. And to be honest father, I hate you. Seeing you suffer is strangely enjoyable."

Kal'Shayar thumped his hands against the glass in anger, feeling it boil over as he regarded the smirk his son now wore.

"Damn you," he said.

The door behind him slid open, the sound of it causing Kal'Shayar to quickly compose himself as he took his hands off of the glass and turned around. General Caine had walked in and he looked at

Kal'Shayar with a discerning gaze, uncertain of the Skirmisher's stability.

"You alright, Kal?" He asked, the door sliding shut behind him.

"I will be fine," Kal'Shayar replied. He glanced back at his son, who sat on the bed, his back against the wall now. He had lost his smirk, returning his gaze to a fairly neutral one, his eyes flitting about as he looked at everything but his father.

"I wouldn't let the prisoner get to you," Caine said, causing Kal'Shayar to turn his head back around to face him. "I know you're family and all, but if it isn't clear enough already, our friend Lev'Kanar is mentally unstable. I've been reading through the records on him that Major Jerashar kindly supplied. You'd do well to peruse them yourself, Kal."

Kal'Shayar nodded. He may very well do that, if only to learn more of the state his son was now in.

Caine walked past Kal'Shayar and stopped by the glass, a smile on his face. He tapped the glass with one hand, getting the attention of the Skirmisher contained within. Lev'Kanar looked over to him with an unamused look on his face, carrying a clear dislike of the General.

"Hey there," Caine said. "We've got special plans for you, buddy."

"What kind of plans?" Kal'Shayar looked at the General, curious.

"I just got a reply back from High Command," Caine said, returning the Skirmisher's gaze. "They're requesting an emergency meeting on Earth. They want to know what we're dealing with, since somehow your boy here got hold of some very sensitive documents. We could be dealing with a serious breach of internal security, serious enough for a lot of the big officials to head back to Earth. That's where we're headed now."

"What about the prisoner?"

"He's coming with us, but he'll be detained in a far more secure facility when we arrive."

Kal'Shayar nodded. The situation was clearly serious if the humans were going to these lengths. He wondered if Lev'Kanar really was the leader of the terrorist operation or not. Someone would have supplied him with those documents, or he may have utilized the AI to acquire them for him. There were too many possibilities and little information to narrow them down. As for going to Earth, he had no problem with this and thought that maybe it would give Elise an opportunity to show him the sorts of places she had told him about. He was actually looking forward to this now, as the thought of it warmed him greatly.

"I think I will get going, General," Kal'Shayar said. The General nodded, before he returned his gaze to the prisoner.

Kal'Shayar turned around and left the room at that point, his mind still full of the doubts he had about his son and about the truths

(or lies) he had told him. They would remain in his head for some time to come, casting a constant sense of doubt over his view of the entire situation.

## 16. Earth

\*\*Earth\*\*

February 13th, 2558

It was early in the morning when Sergeant Valerie Nevas awoke, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes as she rolled out of bed and began to change into an off-duty uniform. Her quarters were small, separate from the barracks. Being a squad leader did allow her to claim her own room, something that was relatively new for her. The mission to Paradise Falls had been her first mission since leaving the hospital, having spent two years cooped up in there. It felt good to be free of that hospital's confines, even if the mission had not gone as planned.

The Vanguard had exited slip-space, presumably in orbit of Earth. The advanced slip-space drives that had been installed on most UNSC ships had decreased travel times considerably, a result of reverse-engineering Covenant and Forerunner technology. As for Earth, Valerie had not been on the planet for several years. She had been born on an Inner Colony world, so Earth was a place that was not terribly important to her as she lacked any real connection to the planet save for the fact that her species had originated from there. Even so, she figured she might finally get a proper vacation as being holed up in a hospital on Reach could not really be considered a 'vacation'.

Valerie slipped into an off-duty uniform rather quickly, putting on a pair of standard-issue boots before leaving the room. The ship's corridors looked much alike, with signs on the walls directing personnel. She had spent much of the night before having very vivid dreams, some of them rather unnerving, so the interference in her sleep had resulted in her feeling somewhat tired still, but she had been unable to doze off again. The only option that had been left for her had been to get out of bed and start her daily routine.

Her dreams had often contained flames and heat, presumably a leftover of the traumatic experience she had been through two years before. Being burned rather severely down one side had left a lasting impression on her, though most of the physical scars had been repaired. It was the mental and emotional ones that worried her the most.

And through the flames in her dreams last night, she had seen the silhouette of a Skirmisher, one she had recognized as Lev'Kanar. This had struck her as odd, yet strangely fascinating. She had thought, when seeing him on Paradise Falls, that she had seen him somewhere before. It was sometimes hard to tell aliens of the same species apart, but she had recognized Lev'Kanar. She had spent the last few days trying to figure out where she knew him from, but was yet to come to a solid conclusion on the matter. Instead, she had considered paying him a visit at his cell but had decided against this the few times the idea had cropped into her head. This morning, she was particularly interested in talking to him. She had the clearance and

she doubted anything would come of the meeting, but she wanted to be certain.

Valerie had always known herself to be open to others, especially those she felt some affinity to, such as Leon. They had both been through traumatic events and were both scarred physically and mentally. Though she had often gotten the impression from the Spartan that he had often not been interested in talking to her, something had changed very recently. She smirked as she made her way down the corridor, remembering the few nights they had spent together since coming on board the ship. She had not been surprised with his inexperience, but that was one quality to their intimacy that she approved of. The Spartan learned quickly and whatever doubts he might have had were gone. He had been frustrated when they had returned from Paradise Falls, annoyed at how he had been captured, but Valerie had at least temporarily quelled these frustrations by spending that night with him. She might have genuinely felt something for him, but she could not be certain. There were some things not even she was sure about.

The security control room was a few decks below, towards the centre of the ship. Valerie made her way there, entering the room and finding a lone technician sitting at a bank of computers and surveillance feed monitors. He looked up as the Sergeant entered. Her presence here did not seem to strike him as odd. Rather, he looked bored, putting aside a data-pad he had been reading before swivelling his chair around to face her.

"Sergeant Nevas," the technician said, one finger scratching at the stubble on his chin. "What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to see the prisoner," Valerie said. She was thought of just leaving at that point, wondering again why she had even bothered coming here, but now that she had stated her intention it seemed silly to turn around and leave.

"The General would prefer no one saw the prisoner," the technician replied, matter-of-factly. "They'll be moving him to a secure facility on Earth in a couple of hours. The General doesn't want to take any chances and would rather the prisoner be left alone."

"Oh..." Valerie frowned, figuring she may just have to leave after all.

"But I suppose I can make an exception," the technician interrupted. "Any reason why you want to see him?"

Valerie thought about this for a moment. Would she tell the truth, or just make up some convenient lie?

"He held me at gunpoint on Paradise Falls. I'd like to know more about him, maybe find out some of his motives."

"Good luck with that." The technician sounded sceptical. "No one else had been able to get much out of him. He likes to be vague and cryptic with his answers."

Valerie nodded. The technician took up a handheld scanning device from the desk and stood up, walking up to the Sergeant as he ran the

scanner over her. Once he was certain she was not carrying any weapons, he put aside the scanner and walked up to the door at the other side of the room. He slid a card through a slot in the control pad by the door, causing it to slide open. Valerie nodded in approval as she walked by him, entering the mostly empty space between the door and the cell.

The cell itself was a short distance up ahead, fairly wide and fronted with thick glass. The prisoner, Lev'Kanar, lay on the single bunk at the back wall of the cell. He was lying on his back, his head plumage pressed flat against the firm surface of the thin mattress, his jacket off and lying on the floor nearby. The rugged outfit he wore contained armour plating on the chest and thighs. His clawed hands were at his lower chest, which moved slowly up and down with each breath he took.

Valerie thought that he looked remarkably peaceful lying there, barely moving. She walked up to the glass, thinking of waking him up. However, before she could make any noise, the apparently sleeping Skirmisher spoke:

"Greetings, Sergeant." He opened his eyes, turning his head towards her. Valerie was stunned only for a second, feeling some sense of uneasiness as the Skirmisher slid off of the bed and rose to his feet. He approached the glass, stopping a very short distance from it, his warm breath fogging up a slight patch in front of his mouth. His slitted pupils were looking straight at her, the yellow irises shining in the white light of the room.

"You remember me," Valerie commented.

"Of course I do." Lev'Kanar paused, his gaze narrowing. "Are you here to seek forgiveness?"

Valerie frowned. What did he mean? There were a few things he had said, back on Paradise Falls, that had confused her. He had told her that she was responsible for something that had caused him much pain, even though she did not recall doing anything to him.

"Forgiveness?" Valerie's tone was laced with confusion. "Forgiveness for what?"

Lev'Kanar lowered his head, shaking it slowly in what Valerie guessed was resignation. He looked up at her again, his raspy voice low but audible through the microphones that were built into the walls between them.

"I should have known you would be ignorant of your actions, like so many other humans," Lev'Kanar said. "You felt yourself drawn to me at this hour, did you not?"

>Valerie said nothing, even though this was true. She had been drawn here through a sense of familiarity.<p>

"You remember me from a time past. Since you did not come here to seek forgiveness, I can only assume you came here to confirm your familiarity with me. As you know, I was the one leading a so-called 'terrorist' group. I stole the military AI. However, our connection goes beyond that." He paused, a slight hint of a smile creeping along his snout, partially showing his sharp teeth.

Valerie remained silent, despite the growing sense of unease she could feel.

"Do you remember me, Sergeant?" Lev'Kanar asked. "I certainly remember you. Our encounter was fleeting, but very memorable."

"You Skirmishers all look the same to me..."

"Nonsense. You recognize me. All you have to do is to connect my face to a place and time. Then things will become clear."

>Valerie did just this. She had not encountered many Skirmishers during her time in the military. They were a rarity on the battlefield, a race that the Covenant had not utilized much in the final years of the war. She instead found her memory going somewhat beyond the war to a little operation run on the fourth planet in the Noya system, on the edge of the space between the human and Kig-Yar empires.<p>

"You thought I was dead. You even dragged my 'body' away. Do you not remember?"

Valerie did indeed remember. The cleanup after the mission had been troublesome, considering the amount of damage that had been caused. It had supposed to be a standard sweep-and-clean, taking out a centre for arms smuggling that was supplying a number of renegade factions. It had instead turned into a large scale fire-fight that had resulted in several dead Marines and a lot of dead Kig-Yar, along with numerous wrecked weapon caches.

She remembered Lev'Kanar now. They had gunned him down at the very end of the fire-fight, considering him nothing more than another one of the many Kig-Yar who had been part of the operation. They had been correct in a sense, but they had not known that he had been the ringleader of the operation, nor had they known that he was still alive.

"You threw my body into the back of a transport," Lev'Kanar said. "You were to take me and several other deceased individuals to a site not far from the compound where you would dispose of our bodies. I was still alive and I took myself off of the transport and hid in the forest. Do you not remember what you did, mere seconds before you and your comrades shot me down?"

Valerie realized now what had occurred. It struck her rather hard and startled her when compared to their current circumstances, as such a connection between them and their presence here could not have been mere coincidence. She recalled throwing the grenade at a vehicle, having seen a group of Kig-Yar climb into it. She had not thought twice when she had seen the smaller Kig-Yar among the group. The vehicle had erupted into flames, a result of her rather accurate grenade throw. Then Lev'Kanar had appeared, yelling at them but they had shot him 'dead' before he could say anything coherent through his grief.

"My mate," Lev'Kanar said, "My children. You killed them. I spent the years since rebuilding my operation, hoping to formulate a force capable of going against the UNSC. You may have been doing your job, following orders, but that does not excuse your ignorance. You could not care less about the ones you killed. They were not human, so clearly they do not deserve the same as your kind does."

"What are you saying?" Valerie swallowed. Lev'Kanar seemed remarkably calm given the topic of discussion.

"You humans spread yourselves across the galaxy and attempt to enforce your beliefs upon others. You already have attempted to influence the Sangheili for your own ends. What will you do to my race?"

"I don't know what you're talking about..."

"You humans talk of peace, yet all you do is ready for war," Lev'Kanar said, his voice laced with venom. "I have been observing your race for several years. You hope to subvert other races, using trade agreements with the Kig-Yar to acquire the materials you need to construct more weapons. Your ignorance of the fact you killed my family is proof of the hubris of humanity. I have spent the last five years building towards something greater, but you came by and destroyed it in one fell swoop."

"What would you prefer?" Valerie asked. "Another war?" She did not like Lev'Kanar. It was clear in her mind that he was crazy. She did feel some regret for killing his family, but there was no way she could have known that was what she had done. Had she known, back on Noya IV, that there were Kig-Yar children in that transport she may have stayed her hand off of the grenade. No wonder she had felt drawn here. The connection between her and Lev'Kanar had been lurking in her subconscious, waiting to be uncovered.

"War is a means to an end," Lev'Kanar said. "Another war will begin, soon. And in the process, humanity will be destroyed. You must not be aware of how much of a scourge you are upon this galaxy. Even the great Forerunners themselves thought as much."

"Yet you continue to talk to me," Valerie replied. "If you hate us so much, why bother?"

"A means to an end." Lev'Kanar fell silent after he said this, still watching Valerie through the glass with a careful gaze, his eyes narrowed menacingly. She got the impression that there were certain plans running through his mind, perhaps even plans of escape and what he would do to her once he was out of the cell.

"If I had known that it was your children-"

"If you had known?" Lev'Kanar scoffed, shaking his head, his calm tone shifting into something more scathing. "If you had known, you would have done the same thing. Or one of your comrades would have done it. You were following orders, doing what you were trained to do. Casualties of war, save for the fact that there was no war on at the time."

"You were part of an arms smuggling ring..."

"You are implying I brought it upon myself." Lev'Kanar paused, giving this some thought. "Maybe I did, maybe I did not. My family was slain by you. The fact that you clearly do not care about them simply proves what I have been saying."

Valerie could see she would not be able to get through to him. It was

clear that his mind was set and attempting to persuade him to change his views would probably be a waste of time.

"I do care. Now that I know what happened, it hurts. I had no way of knowing what I did that day. I had nearly no idea who was in that transport."

"Your words ring hollow, human." He said the last word with noticeable distaste. "I can see the truth in you. You do not care, you never will. They were nothing to you. Do you think the same of the other lives you have claimed?"

"It comes with the job." She was thinking of leaving now, having heard more than enough. It almost seemed as if he was actually getting to her, trying his best to elicit a reaction from her. He had a careful way with words, this Lev'Kanar.

"Seeing the Lieutenant shoot you on Paradise Falls would have been an entertaining sight," Lev'Kanar added, referring back to what had happened on the planet. Valerie could remember it all quite well, including the 'game' Lev'Kanar had elected to play with Leon. He had handed him a pistol and had been attempting to get him to shoot the cup off of her head over a distance, clearly relying on the fact that Leon's shooting skills were no longer up to par. It had given Valerie some indication that Lev'Kanar's mind was fairly twisted.

"He feels strongly for you. For him to be responsible for your death would have made the vengeance all the more sweeter." He paused, putting both his hands against the glass, looking Valerie right in the eyes. "Mark my words, Sergeant. When I get out of here, and I will, I will be coming for you. Perhaps not directly, but you will know what it feels to suffer absolute loss."

Valerie said nothing. There was nothing more to be said.

Behind her, the door slid open. She turned around and saw the General enter, flanked by four armed guards. He gestured towards the cell door and the guards walked towards it, one of them keying a code into the panel by the door. The door unlocked and the guard slid it open, with two of the others walking into the cell with their side-arms out and held at the ready. Lev'Kanar took his hands off of the glass and turned to face the newcomers, looking at them dispassionately.

"Alright birdman, you're coming with us," Caine said as he walked into the cell. He managed a glance at Valerie, surprised to see her here but otherwise did not seem too concerned with her presence. The remaining two guards followed him inside, one of them removing a pair of manacles that he held in one hand.

Lev'Kanar was set upon by two of the guards, who grabbed him by the arms. The guard with the bulky set of manacles walked forwards, with the other two officers forcing Lev'Kanar to stretch out his arms towards him. The manacles were clicked into place around his wrists, binding his hands together before he was pushed out of the cell and escorted with a guard on either side and one behind him. Caine emerged from the cell, stopping near Valerie, watching as Lev'Kanar was taken out of the room.

"What's going on, General?" Valerie asked.

"We're taking him down to Earth," Caine said, turning to face her. "He'll be interrogated far more thoroughly and effectively down there. In the meantime, we're going to be meeting with some important people in High Command. They're worried about what this Lev'Kanar guy represents."

Valerie frowned at this. Clearly the General was more knowledgeable on the subject than she was.

"And what does he represent, sir?"

"Anarchy." Caine said this rather flatly while reaching into a pocket on the front of his jacket, pulling a cigar from within. "All evidence we've collected on him links him to a plot to ignite another war. He's just the tip of the iceberg, with a sizeable arms smuggling business going on. At least, that was until he decided to steal that military AI. We still have no idea what he was planning to do with that."

"Why Earth? Why not someplace out of the way?"

"The people in High Command would rather they have him right where they can keep an eye on him," Caine said.

Valerie nodded. Caine noticed the distant gaze on her face, giving a slight frown as he lit his cigar.

"You look like something's on your mind." He lit the cigar with his chrome metal lighter, taking a short drag on it as smoke wafted forth.

"I killed his family," Valerie said bluntly. Caine did not look surprised. Instead, he just nodded, as if he had been expecting it.

"I know what happened," Caine said. "I read about it, including some reports from outside sources." He said this all very matter-of-factly, as it was nothing new to him. Valerie, on the other hand, felt a rather strong burst of frustration at that point.

"You knew?" She spat. Caine narrowed his gaze at her, causing her to quickly compose herself. Last thing she needed was to get in trouble for insubordination.

"You knew, sir?" She shook her head. "That's why you wanted to hear about the Noya IV mission from me. But doesn't having me here cause a conflict of interests?"

"Not really. You didn't know what you'd done to him, while I had to piece it together from a bunch of disparate accounts. I was working from speculation. As for me putting you on this mission, I thought having you here might give us something to exploit. It's clear Lev'Kanar knew who you were, so I was thinking that his personal lust for vengeance would provide something we could take advantage of." He paused for a moment, letting his words sink in. "Things didn't really work out that way. I might even say things went better than expected."

Valerie only nodded in acknowledgement. She felt like she had been

used, but she did know where Caine was coming from with what he had said. It might have provided an exploitable variable in the mission, but obviously things had not happened like that, exactly.

"Anyway, Sergeant," Caine said, changing the subject. "Report to the main hangar in an hour. We'll be taking a trip down to Earth."

The Sergeant nodded in response. Caine left the room then, his cigar sticking out of one corner of his mouth. This left Valerie alone in the room to mull over what had been discussed, still concerned that her presence here might disrupt things with Lev'Kanar, rather than make them go any better.

\* \* \*

><p>There was an observation room on the lower part of the ship that provided a wide vista of the space outside. Elise McGillon was here, dressed in her usual grey uniform, watching the Earth below them. The planet took up much of the view from the window, all swirling white clouds and blue seas, mingled in with the dark green and brown of land masses. Looking from high in orbit, the entire planet seemed so small, a blue orb against a backdrop of millions of stars, many of them planets in themselves. There were other ships outside of varying shapes and sizes, along with several of the orbital weapons platforms that served as one of Earth's lines of defence against attackers. Most had been destroyed during the war, but the reconstruction effort had reinstated about a third of the orbital cannon network. It was taxpayer money at work.<p>

The observation room was fairly small, containing a few chairs and little else. Elise was alone here and had come down on a whim after hearing that they had arrived at Earth. It had been a long time since she had last been on Earth and she wondered now if she would get an opportunity to go down to her home city to see how much things had changed, maybe meet some old friends and relatives. It seemed unlikely she would get the opportunity right away from what she had heard, with Lev'Kanar to be sent to a secure facility on the surface while the General and the others in the team went to be briefed by some higher-ups in High Command.

She had been given her usual supervisory role for the mission to Paradise Falls, not that she had ended up doing much. The people on the ground had fallen under a jamming field that had resulted in a loss of communications, leaving them without guidance and her with nothing else to do but wait. Fortunately, it seemed that things had worked out during the mission. It had also yielded some interesting results, as now Kal'Shayar's son was being held prisoner on charges of terrorism and arms smuggling. As far as she knew, the Kig-Yar government had left the whole problem to them, clearly not interested in taking responsibility for the actions of one of their own. There was also the psychological effect it had had on Kal'Shayar, who had become somewhat more distant since the mission.

As for the stolen AI, she had had some of the technicians run a basic diagnostic. So far, it seemed normal but they could not be sure until they ran it through a better system, the sort that would definitely be on Earth.

At that moment, there was the sound of the door sliding open behind her. It caused her to turn around, her train of thought broken as she

watched Kal'Shayar enter. He was not in his armour as usual, but rather in a grey outfit and jacket with orange trimmings indicating his rank. There was some armour plating at the chest, but otherwise the outfit was purely unofficial. His booted feet clacked on the metal floor as he approached, the door sliding shut behind him. Most Skirmishers tended to move slightly hunched down, especially when they were in a fight, but Kal'Shayar carried himself straighter than most, confident in each stride he took. Elise greeted him with a friendly smile. He returned a similar expression, from what the Commander could tell, as she had gradually become more used to what the expressions Kal'Shayar pulled meant.

"I heard you were down here," the Skirmisher said. He stepped past her, looking out at what lay through the window ahead. He remained still for a moment, silent as he regarded the wondrous view.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Elise asked.

Kal'Shayar nodded in agreement, turning his head to look at her.

"Yes. It looks as my world does, from orbit. There is considerably more water on Sauem, but the similarities are there." He paused, his expression turning serious. "The General says we will be leaving for the surface in about an hour. They already have begun escorting Lev'Kanar to a drop-ship."

Elise nodded. She noted that Kal'Shayar did not refer to his son as such, playing into the fact that he had more or less disowned the clearly unruly offspring.

"You could show me around your world, as you have said," Kal'Shayar continued. "I am curious about it."

"I haven't been here for years," Elise said. "Things have probably changed." She was silent for several seconds as they both regarded the view again. Finally, she spoke again, this time speaking what was on her mind.

"You haven't spoke much about your son," she said. "You've told me you don't think highly of him, but don't you feel anything for him? Sympathy, perhaps?"

Kal'Shayar scowled in disapproval. Elise had never seen him this annoyed before and an angered Skirmisher could look very animalistic, snarling and bearing their teeth. It was in considerable contrast to Kal'Shayar's normally reserved demeanour.

"My son is a criminal, as I have said. It is clear now, is it not? He is prisoner aboard this vessel, soon to be moved to an even more secure facility on the planet below." Kal'Shayar was blunt and clearly did not like discussing the subject.

"You must be disappointed..."

"Of course I am disappointed," he interrupted. "However, he made his choices. I let him make those choices, giving him guidance where appropriate. It is not my fault he did not heed this guidance. Now he is in his current situation, a direct consequence of the rebellious

actions he took early on in his life."

"You ever think of what you might do if you could go back in time?" Elise asked.

"No. I cannot go back, as much as I would like to. As for what I would do..." He shook his head. "It is not something I have given much thought. I would rather focus on the present while paying heed to what the future may bring. That includes accepting what has occurred, no matter how distasteful."

Elise could respect that. She did not like to dwell on the past too much either.

"Do you care what happens to your son?" Elise asked. It seemed like a harsh question, but it was a valid one. Kal'Shayar's gaze softened a little and he brushed below his snout with one hand, giving his response careful consideration.

"Of course I do," he said after a lengthy pause. "That is what frustrates me the most. Lev'Kanar is a disgrace, yet I still find myself worrying about what will happen to him. It was so much easier to assume he was dead, killed on some far away world, a result of his criminal activities. Now that I know he is alive, it becomes even harder to accept the possible fates that await him."

Elise could detect genuine concern in his voice. Kal'Shayar took his hand from his snout and instead ran it through the dark plumage on his head, much like a human moving a hand through their hair, as if anxious about something.

"You still care about him."

"I would be a terrible father if I did not." Kal'Shayar paused, tilting his head slightly as he regarded Elise. He was a few inches taller and certainly bulkier in terms of muscle, but despite his alien appearance Elise did not find herself intimidated by him at all.

"He is the last in our clan," Kal'Shayar continued. "We used to be a strong clan, but over the centuries our power diminished and the clan system became less important. It concerns me that our family history will fade away once we are both gone--"

"You shouldn't worry too much about that sort of thing," Elise said reassuringly. She was not too familiar with the Kig-Yar clan system, considering it something she would need to read up on and even ask Kal'Shayar about some time. "I mean...Even if your son may not continue the family line, there's still you."

"I do not think I could ever find another mate," Kal'Shayar said, his doubt clear in his voice. He raised an eyebrow ridge at Elise in a curious manner. "At least, I never thought I could. I..." He trailed off, falling silent. Elise gave him a questioning look, able to tell that there was something else on his mind.

"I have gotten to know you well over the past few weeks," Kal'Shayar said. "It is strange, as I never guessed I would become friends with a human. Sometimes I find certain thoughts in my mind, in regards to you, and they make me feel uncertain. I know I should not be thinking

of such things, as I consider you a friend, but somehow I feel I have a connection to you, Elise. It worries me, as I feel that little will be able to come of it."

Elise was silent upon hearing this confession. Kal'Shayar might have had an almost raptor-like appearance, but he also possessed a certain charm that she had come to admire. His concern over feeling strongly for her was understandable, given their differences and the history of the species' relations.

"You're my friend as well, Kal," Elise said. She took a step closer to him, taking one of his hands in her own. This surprised him, judging by the look on his face and the way his normally confident posture momentarily faltered. His hand, with its dark blue-black skin, was cool to the touch. "I'd like to think this friendship could go on for some time."

"We will end up going our separate ways once our work in the team is over," Kal'Shayar said. He straightened himself, putting his other hand on top of her own. He looked her straight in the eyes, the look in his own sincere. "We might not even see each other again after that."

"Maybe. I'd like to make our time memorable, but..." She trailed off, swallowing. It was not something she had seriously considered, but it had come into her thoughts now and again. Kal'Shayar knew what she was getting at. He slowly let go of her hand and took a step backwards, shaking his head.

"I would prefer some time to think about this," Kal'Shayar said. "You understand..."

"I do. It's no problem." Elise was in no hurry herself. The whole prospect made her more nervous than anything else ever had.

Kal'Shayar nodded in approval, glancing around the room as if considering his options.

"Perhaps we should go and meet with the General," he suggested, changing the subject. "He will be expecting us."

"Of course. Lead the way." The mood had been ruined but their reluctance and anxiety, but there was still something oddly alluring about Kal'Shayar. It was clear to her that there was something between them, however unlikely.

## 17. Sydney

\*\*Sydney\*\*

February 13th, 2558

The High Command facility in Sydney Harbour was an elaborate complex, comprised of about three tall, monolithic structures that were surrounded by lush green gardens and footpaths. Smaller subsidiary buildings sat around them and the compound itself was walled-in by a large concrete barrier, with the accessible points of entry being the guarded gates. There was a whole underground complex under the

facility as well, accessible from the buildings and from ground entrances that were scattered about the compound. It was a bustling hub at activity at almost any hour of the day and even the night, serving as one of the most important facilities for the UNSC as a whole. Much of the higher operations of that organization were carried out from here, as well as a few similar facilities scattered around the planet.

Those other facilities, including one in Europe and one in Africa, had been destroyed during the war. When the main Covenant fleet had arrived, these hubs of UNSC operations were targeted first, brought down by orbital bombardment in some cases (when the Covenant ships had not been preoccupied fighting the orbital defences). The city of Sydney had remained relatively untouched by the invasion force, receiving only a few small scale incursions that had resulted in mostly ground combat, with some buildings within the city. Five years from the proper end of the war and the High Command facility had become the centre of the UNSC. While the other facilities were being gradually rebuilt, along with many other towns and cities that had been destroyed in the invasion, the main chunk of UNSC command operations had been moved to this remaining compound. The scars of the war were still on Earth, but Sydney was one of the few that had healed quickly.

The main building was taller than the others, a vast complex that towered over much of the city. The front lobby opened into a vast expanse that ran up the centre of the building, with walkways running from one side of the expanse to the other on many of the floors high above. An indoor garden sat in the central plaza area, with a large water fountain in the centre of it that gave the place some vague sense of tranquillity. There were all sorts of people moving about, on the ground floor and those far above, ranging from civilians in business suits to officers in Navy uniforms. At this morning hour (it was about eleven o'clock) activity here was constant. The entire building was full of offices and conference rooms of varying sizes, with some more recreational areas dotted about for when people had time off. Announcements were made regularly through the public announcement system, often concerning basic safety and security measures. A long line of people were at the public entrance, each person having to go through a scanner before signing in and being given their visitor's passes. Small drones flew about, spherical in shape, fitted with a single camera 'eye' and scanner. They would sometimes pause near someone, taking a quick scan to ensure they were not carrying any weapons. That person's facial profile was then put through a computer database and corroborated with any records of them on file, including whether or not they had properly checked in. There were a few heavier drones flying around, larger with blue and grey paintwork and more than one attached scanner. They were about five feet long with wings that were fitted with guns. These larger security drones were programmed to stay out of the way of the people inside, keeping to designated patrols as they flew through the central expanse in the building as well as above the grounds outside. If any of the smaller surveillance drones detected trouble, these heavy security drones would fly to the scene in order to respond to whatever kind of security risk had been detected. The whole drone security force was controlled by an AI from a control room deep within the heart of the complex. That AI was watched by actual human beings, as not even in this day and age were computers completely trusted. There was still need for a human to keep tabs on such an elaborate operation. There were still human guards here, for

instance, who manned the security gates and patrolled the inside of the building as well as the compound outside.

The front reception area consisted of several different receptionists spread out across a lengthy set of desks behind wooden and glass barriers. Above this, upon a wall, sat a large version of the UNSC emblem. Behind, past some security gates, was the main plaza with its garden and water fountain. There were about a dozen elevators dotted around this area, several of them in motion even now, working their way up the many floors of the building. A pair of security drones buzzed up high, pausing on their patrol as they ran a routine scan of passers-by.

Leon stood at one of the reception desks, looking around the room with some uncertainty. He was in a grey Navy uniform, the sort he had never felt very comfortable in. He preferred his armour and having gotten back into it for the Paradise Falls mission, after being out of it for so long, had made him realize how much he had missed wearing it. Now here he was on some official business for the first time in a while, accompanied by Serena and General Caine. The General was talking to the young woman who sat behind the reception desk, leaning against the top of the barrier as he tried to get his point across that they were meant to be here. Apparently the man who had called them here was currently busy, something that did not quite work with the timeframe he had given them. He was meant to have finished his business about half an hour ago, leaving a few hours for him to discuss matters with the General and the Spartans. This man, an Admiral according to what Leon had been told, was running late. Caine did not seem terribly impressed with this and was trying to convince the receptionist to let them through to meet with the Admiral. That receptionist had been trying to contact that very Admiral, but he was apparently engaged enough to not answer any calls.

Leon did not like this place. Its size, its appearance...There was something artificial about it. He also did not trust the drones that were flying around. He had never been one to trust artificial intelligence, especially when it was in control of several large guns such as those fitted to the heavy security drones. One of the small surveillance drones buzzed up to him, keeping airborne by a few small propellers encased in a pair of fins at its rear. It hovered in place much like a hummingbird, its camera 'eye' moving in its socket to look straight at him. The Spartan knew that his facial profile was being photographed and put through to some database, with the AI in charge sifting through the records to find the appropriate one. This all happened within a second, the AI able to confirm his identity and reason for being here before sending the drone off on another patrol. With the drone flying away, Leon felt himself relax a little. Though it was uncommon, there were sometimes accidents with such drones, especially when the AI controlling them had started to get close to the end of its lifespan. Once rampancy kicked in, it would take very little for an AI to assume that every newcomer to a facility such as this was a terrorist.

Caine's tone of voice was stern, yet calm, as he spoke to the receptionist. Serena stood a short distance away, hands behind her back as she looked around, taking in her surroundings. She was dressed in a similar uniform to Leon, the expression on her face her usual emotionless and neutral one. She glanced at Leon for a moment but was quick to direct her attention elsewhere. Leon got the

impression that she did not approve of his involvement in the team, something he had figured since the moment they had met.

As for the other team members, Leon knew that Commander McGillon had been sent off to another part of the compound to check the recovered AI. Sergeant Nevas was supposed to be here but she had somewhat cleverly excused herself from what would probably be a fairly dull meeting. Instead, she had opted to grab something to eat whilst relying on Leon to relay any important information from the meeting to her. He had no problem with this, and though he assumed the meeting with the Admiral would be nothing more than a debriefing, he was curious to see if any new information concerning their terrorist enemies might be supplied. As for the alien members of the team, Kal'Shayar and his squad had gone with the prisoner to a secure underground detainment complex, located underneath the compound. It would be a while before the people here got around to interrogating Lev'Kanar properly. Judging from his experience with the terrorist, it was unlikely that Lev'Kanar would be willing to divulge much information as to the full extent of his operation and what he had been planning.

Caine suddenly turned around, speaking towards Serena and Leon. Both Spartans looked towards him.

"The Admiral's finally ready for us," Caine said. He nodded in the direction of the nearest elevator. "His office is on the seventieth floor. Come on." He turned around and started for the elevator, with both Spartans following closely behind.

It was not often Spartans were seen in this place, so Leon and Serena did get some odd looks as they walked across the plaza and towards an elevator. It was easy to tell they were Spartans, from their height and muscular frames. The fact that the Spartan project had become public years before compounded matters somewhat.

Caine was the first one to the elevator and he pressed a button in the panel by its doors. Those doors slid open, allowing the trio entry before the General tapped the button for the seventieth floor. The doors slid shut and the elevator started, keeping a steady pace as it rose high above the plaza, stopping at another floor along the way in order to pick up a pair of what looked to be maintenance personnel, judging by their orange coveralls. They stood in front of Serena and Leon, remaining silent as the doors slid shut and the elevator resumed its course. One of them tapped the button for the fifty-fourth floor, causing the elevator to stop here and allow the two maintenance workers off.

"The size of this place never ceases to amaze me," Caine said, standing by the wall on Leon's left. He turned around, looking towards Serena and Leon, his gaze going through the thick glass window behind them. "It's the unofficial centre of the UNSC. They do all sorts of stuff here. Security's some of the tightest I've ever encountered."

"You can't be too careful, sir," Serena added.

Caine nodded in agreement.

"Certainly not now," he replied. The elevator stopped at the seventieth floor, the doors sliding open in order to let the

occupants exit. The trio walked out onto a carpeted hallway that overlooked the central expanse, with the plaza looking much smaller from such a ways up.

Security was fairly tight up here. There was an armed guard seated at a desk nearby, milling over something on his computer terminal while an automated turret sat partially concealed in the ceiling above. It would fully emerge at a moment's notice and react to any threat. The door behind this checkpoint was a large metal one with the sign 'LEVEL FIVE SECURITY CLEARANCE ZONE' stuck upon it. Caine walked up to the guard at the desk, as did Leon and Serena. He flashed his identification at the guard, who looked up with a bored face and regarded the ID with narrowed eyes.

"General Caine?" The guard asked. "Admiral Vance is expecting you." He then shifted his gaze towards the two Spartans standing a short distance behind him. "Are they cleared?"

Leon and Serena held up their identification for the guard to see. He nodded before he rose out of his chair and walked up to the door. He took out a pass-card, one that was amber in colour, and swiped it through a slot in a panel by the door before keying in a short code of numbers using the keypad below it. The door slid open, revealing a wider grey-white corridor beyond with several large glass-windowed offices.

"Proceed on through, sir," he said to the General. "The Admiral's office is through the second door on the right."

"Thank you," Caine said before he stepped into the office complex beyond. Leon and Serena followed, with Caine leading the way to the Admiral's office as directed by the security guard.

The office took up a sizeable chunk of the area, sitting in a corner with two of its sides comprised of glass that allowed a mostly unobstructed view within. The door that lead inside was wide open, with an ageing man in a white uniform, one that studded with multi-coloured ribbons, sat behind a wooden desk at the office's far end. There were no windows in this particular area, presumably as a security precaution. Thankfully, the wide open spaces and air conditioning prevented the place from becoming uncomfortably stuffy.

The Admiral rose out of his seat as Caine walked in, followed by Leon and Serena. The Admiral looked to be in his sixties, perhaps even seventies, with grey hair and light brown eyes set into a weathered visage marked with the blemishes and sagging that came with age. This part of the building was remarkably quiet save for the hum of the air conditioning.

The Admiral held out a hand to the General, who in turn took it and they shook in greeting.

"General Caine, it's been a while," the Admiral said. He broke from the handshake, turning his attention towards the two Spartans. "I understand that these two are the Spartans mentioned in the reports I was sent?"

"That's correct, Admiral," Caine said. He sat down in a vacant chair in front of the Admiral's desk. Leon shook hands with the Admiral, as

did Serena before they both sat down in the remaining two chairs themselves.

Leon's gaze went to the small black metal sign sitting at the front of the desk. It read: ADMIRAL TIMOTHY VANCE.

"What you have down in these reports is worrying," Vance said. "We're talking about a massive security leak, worst one we've had for decades. Not even the Covenant acquired this sort of sensitive information during the war. Every time they tried to, we'd stop them. Now..."

>"Now we're dealing with a lot of ex-Covenant types with a vendetta against humanity," Caine interrupted. Doing this to an Admiral did not seem to be in good etiquette, but Vance did not seem too fussed. It was clear these two knew each other and trusted each other well as a result. "I was told that the Security Council's members would be meeting to discuss the matter?"<p>

"Indeed they will be," Vance replied. "They're all here and getting ready for that meeting."

"Why aren't we having that meeting now?" Caine raised an eyebrow inquisitively.

"Because we need more information," Vance said, sounding a little exasperated. "You insisted on getting the Security Council involved and now they are. However, the fact of the matter is, we haven't got a lot to go on. To be honest, the Security Council does not perceive these terrorists to be as much of a threat as you think they are."

Caine looked surprised for a moment, but Leon watched as he reset his composure to his usually calm, easy-going one. Leon had seen what the terrorists were capable of first-hand. The fact that they had successfully stolen a military AI was enough to prove how dangerous they were. No one else had managed such a feat, not even the Covenant during the war.

"You have the prisoner, right?" Caine smiled, but not because he was amused. It was more of an 'I can't believe this' type smile. "Why don't you go down and talk to him? Maybe apply some of those good old-fashioned 'interrogation techniques'? Because somehow that shithead got hold of some very sensitive information without us knowing. You even said so yourself: the Covenant never did this sort of thing, certainly not with this level of success. We could be facing an internal leak."

>Vance looked concerned, but it was clear that his hands were tied. The Security Council had the final say in just about everything the UNSC did.<p>

"The prisoner is yet to be thoroughly interrogated," Vance replied. "As for the information leak, it's clear in the reports that somehow these terrorists utilized the AI they stole."

"How did they do that without us detecting it?" Caine asked.

"They were detected. That's what lead you to their headquarters on Paradise Falls in the first place."

Caine shook his head. After all they had done, it seemed that

bureaucracy would get the better of them. Leon felt like speaking up but decided against it, thinking that Caine might not appreciate the interruption.

"That didn't involve them somehow scooping sensitive documents out of our databases," Caine said. "We would have detected that. What we detected was a momentary connection made by the stolen AI. That's it, nothing more. They couldn't have gotten the documents we found in the possession of Lev'Kanar."

>Vance nodded thoughtfully, having listened carefully. Even so, Leon could tell he was not fully convinced.<p>

"So you're saying there's a security leak?" He asked. "An actual leak, as if someone within this very building even, could be willingly handing sensitive information to an alien terrorist group?"

Caine nodded. Leon found the notion a bit hard to believe himself, but he supposed that anything was possible. Pay someone enough money and they might be willing to do anything you told them to, even if that involved supplying sensitive information to former enemies of humanity.

"That's crazy. Who would do that?" Vance frowned, clasping his hands as he rested them on the desk.

"I don't know. That's what we have to find out."

"It's very unlikely..."

"But not impossible."

A short silence fell between them. Vance regarded Leon with a careful gaze before doing the same to Serena. Caine leaned back in his chair, looking slightly annoyed.

"Do your two associates have anything to add about the matter?" Vance asked.

Caine glanced at Serena, who shook her head, before turning his head to look at Leon.

"Lieutenant?" He asked.

Leon was silent as he considered what he might say. After a moment, he spoke, hoping to persuade the Admiral to some degree but doubting he would succeed.

"Anything's possible," Leon said. "Someone could very well be supplying these terrorists with information. From what I've experienced with the apparent leader of this group, Lev'Kanar, he comes across as very charismatic. I can see why someone like him has as many followers as he does. It's likely he has people in the UNSC. He's probably been paying them with the wealth he achieved through arms smuggling."

"Why would anyone betray the UNSC to alien terrorists?"

"Who knows?" Leon shrugged. It was a valid question, but he was sure there were people out there, some who might even be working in the

UNSC, who might have disagreed with the way the higher-ups were running things.

"That would imply the organization is corrupt," Vance said.

"Is it?"

He shook his head, but there was a look of visible uncertainty on his face. Clearly, he did not quite believe this himself. Corruption was practically everywhere in some form, to deny that the UNSC had any seemed foolish.

"We will interrogate the prisoner," Vance said, breaking the silence. "And we will get whatever information we need from him. Until then, the Security Council isn't keen on starting a witch-hunt for whoever leaked these documents, if there even is anyone within the UNSC responsible for it. I'm certain the prisoner will divulge how he acquired those documents, given the appropriate 'encouragement'."

The last word was clearly referring to harsher interrogation techniques, though it seemed likely that these would be the only means in which they would get Lev'Kanar talking. So far the Skirmisher had provided vague and cryptic clues as to what he was planning, none of which had been particularly helpful. Leon would have been willing to torture the alien himself as payback for everything he had done, but it was a fairly well-known fact that flat-out torture was not an effective means of getting information. More creative methods were required. The possibility that Lev'Kanar was simply psychotic came to mind, and if this was the case then Leon doubted any amount of interrogation would give much success.

"We took the opportunity to do some more digging concerning this Lev'Kanar individual," Vance said. "It seems, according to Kig-Yar sources, he's been recruiting from several of their worlds, building some kind of 'movement'. He's given the usual promises, such as protecting the future of their species, but there's been nothing specific."

"He's told us as much," Caine replied. "I get the impression he just likes toying with us. This whole thing is nothing but a game to him. I don't know how successful you'll be in interrogating him, but if he's as nuts as I think he is then he isn't going to tell you shit." The General's cynicism was clear and he did not seem concerned with how he was pretty much mouthing off at a superior. "If anything, he has it in for us humans. Blames us for the loss of his family. Thinks we're trying to subjugate his species."

"And his father is one of the Kig-Yar on the team?" Vance asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, that's right, Admiral. Quite a coincidence, don't you think?"

Vance frowned, but did not comment on this. Leon thought about such coincidences, finding it strange how he had been specifically put on this team to end up capturing the very same Skirmisher who had crippled him months before. Sergeant Nevas had been the one responsible for the death of Lev'Kanar's family while Kal'Shayar was the young Skirmisher's father. Thinking about it like this, taking it

all in perspective, made it clear to him that there might have been more to it than just mere coincidence. Leon said nothing though, deciding to look into the matter in more detail later on.

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><p>The underground detainment facility was one of the most secure on the planet, located at least a kilometre under the surface with every entrance guarded by automated defences and security personnel.

Kal'Shayar was down here, sitting in a small well-lit room with a glass observation window that looked towards the cell his son was currently residing in. The cell was larger than the one that had been on board the <em>Vanguard</em>, with metal pillars at each corner and thick glass windows at all sides with a single locked metal door at the front. Lev'Kanar was in his usual outfit, sitting on a chair in the centre of the cell, head down and hands in his lap. The room Kal'Shayar sat in looked over the mostly empty expanse where the cell was located. The cell itself sat dead in the centre of this larger room. There were two guards standing within this room, watching the cell and the prisoner inside closely, wary of movements the prisoner may make.

Kal'Shayar sat in the observation room in silence, aware that Javal sat on a chair across the room, crunching loudly on some kind of snack he had acquired from a 'vending machine' in the adjoining corridor. The rest of the Kig-Yar squad were scattered about the complex, most staying in a recreational room a considerable distance down the corridor. There were a few guards were posted outside and another stood outside of the observation room.

Kal'Shayar had much on his mind, especially the matter of Lev'Kanar and what might become of him. So far, his son had not reacted at all negatively towards his current situation. Instead, he simply sat in his cell, calm and content. It was as if he had accepted his fate, something that only stirred up a sense of uncertainty within Kal'Shayar. He had raised his son and though they had been apart for several years, he doubted that Lev'Kanar had lost his capacity for taking charge of a situation and tackling it head-on, often with success. That included being locked up.

There was also the matter of what he felt for Elise McGillon, a matter that had distracted him greatly. He had not expected to develop such affection for a human and as such he was very uncertain as to what to do about it. He could not just bury the feelings he had, as they would only get more prominent. Rather, he had been mulling over them in his head since arriving here, going through the different possibilities. He was yet to reach a definitive conclusion and found himself becoming increasingly concerned about Lev'Kanar. Why would he accept his imprisonment so easily?

"I can sense your indecision from in here, father."

Lev'Kanar's voice shattered Kal'Shayar's train of thought, causing him to look up and through the window ahead, his gaze going to the cell below. Lev'Kanar was looking his way, though there was no way he could see him through the window. It was a one-way mirror, with Lev'Kanar's side providing nothing but a reflection. His voice was carried through microphones built into the walls of the cell that transmitted it into the observation room, allowing those inside to hear the prisoner with as much clarity as if he were in the room with

them.

"Do not worry, father. I shall be out of here eventually." Lev'Kanar returned his gaze to directly in front of him, lowering his head as if entering into meditation. Kal'Shayar's sense of uncertainty was only amplified by what had been said, but as far as he could tell the cell was secure. Even if Lev'Kanar somehow got out, there would not be anywhere for him to go. The guards would be on him within seconds and the automated security systems would cut him down if need be. It would be hard, seeing his own son be gunned down like that, but if it was necessary...

Kal'Shayar ended the thought. He wondered when the interrogators would arrive, as they would certainly need his help with getting through to his son. In the meantime, all he could do was wait.

\* \* \*

><p>On one of the lower levels of the main building, Elise McGillon had found herself in one of the larger computer rooms. She had acquired the aid of one of the lead technicians, a young man with dark hair who seemed bored with what they were doing. So far he had been running a basic diagnostic on the recovered AI, a task that took a great deal of time given just how complicated an AI's coding could be. It essentially equated to sitting and watching a computer screen while the technician scrolled through the code and used diagnostic software tools to search for any anomalies. They were the only two people in this room and every other computer was unoccupied, most switched off. There was a guard sitting at a desk out in the corridor, but otherwise Elise was alone with the technician.</p>

The General had ordered her to make sure the AI was in proper working order, but he had clearly been unaware of just how useless she was here. She did have a very good knowledge of computers, but as for the current task she had nothing to do. The technician knew what he was doing, having done similar things in the past, while Elise was simply here to watch him do his work and make sure nothing went wrong. The technician had also been rather uninterested in the task, having gone ahead with a somewhat more effective way of completing it that involved linking the AI into the network and allowing the facility's resident AI to aid in the diagnostics. While the AI did most of the work, even the technician had been left with only a supervisory role. Neither of the pair spoke to one another. Elise simply wanted to get this over and done with so she could get back to the General and hopefully call it a day.

The boredom did give her time to think. She was still thinking over what had occurred between her and Kal'Shayar earlier, unsure whether to act on it or not. The Skirmisher certainly had the charm and they had become good friends within the weeks they had known each other, but as for anything beyond that...she was seriously doubtful. Just thinking about the possibilities made her anxious and not in a good way. Did she really carry attraction for an alien, one that was almost raptor-like in appearance? It seemed like such a stupid thing, but there was no denying what she felt. Whether she should act on those feelings was what concerned her the most.

"This could take a while longer," the technician said. He looked up at her, a bored look on his face. "Maybe even another hour."

"I haven't got much else to do," Elise replied. She felt rather underutilized on this team, but she supposed it came with her job. She was not meant to be out on the field, getting into shootouts. She had usually been the one on a ship in orbit, guiding the teams on the ground. Her career in fieldwork had ended years before, a result of going against orders in an effort to save civilians. The whole thing had ended badly and she preferred not to think about it, as it served as a reminder of the dead-end her career had found. Being on this team was just a stroke of luck, one that was yet to actually gain her any rewards in terms of promotions or respect.

The technician's gaze had returned to the computer. Something was flashing red on the screen, getting his attention.

"There's been an error in the process," he said, confusion evident in his voice.

"How so?" Elise leaned forwards, curious.

"Apparently the AI contains some sort of anomaly," he replied, tapping the keys in front of him. "I'll get in touch with Garth."

"Garth?"

"The name of the AI that runs this place," the technician said. Elise nodded, though she had never been too fond of the odd names some of these AIs were given.

"Garth, what's the problem?" The technician said this aloud, awaiting a response. None came, which was odd since Garth had spoken to them earlier when they had hooked the recovered AI up to the computer systems here.

The lack of response clearly worried the technician, who began typing away at the computer, sifting through the streams of code that were trailing down the screen. He changed the display to what was a visual representation of the network contained within the compound, eyes widening as he saw that the anomaly had started spreading rapidly.

"Shit," he muttered.

"What is it?" Elise had a good idea of the answer, looking at the screen and the creeping stream of red that had started to move between nodes. Each node represented some important system within the facility's network, from what she could gather.

"There was some kind of worm buried in the code," he stated. "Garth must have tapped into it when he was helping us with the diagnostic." He paused, realizing that his keystrokes had stopped eliciting a reaction from the computer. He rose out of his chair, speaking aloud in the hopes of getting the AI to hear him.

"Garth, disconnect every computer in this room." He looked around, hoping for a reply, but received none. He returned his gaze to the computer in front of him, watching as the 'worm' had started to pick up its pace, moving from node-to-node with alarming speed.

"Whatever that thing is, it's working its way into every computer

system in the facility," the technician said. At that moment, the lights dimmed, flickered once and then went out completely. The computers remained on, their displays casting subdued glows across the room.

"We should sound the alarm," Elise said. The technician nodded, moving over to an alarm panel on the wall. A thin layer of glass protected the alarm button but he smashed this easily with an elbow, pressing the button in the process. Red lights began to flash, followed by a long, drawn-out siren that echoed throughout the building. Both Elise and the technician raced out into the hallway, the lights being off out here as well. The alarm had caught most people off-guard, with some simply stopping in their tracks, surprised at the noise.

Elise made her way to the edge of the tenth floor, where she was located, looking down towards the central plaza. Security bulkheads had begun to close over the main entrances as well as the windows on the first few floors, as if whatever was in the system wanted to keep people in. It occurred to her now what the computer 'worm' was doing, occupying the systems it infected and taking control of them. That clearly included the security systems, which were very important in a place like this.

As a security door slammed shut in the corridor behind her, Elise was struck with the thought that what had been a fairly dull assignment had turned into something quite the opposite. She did not think this was for the better.

## 18. From Within

\*\*From Within\*\*

February 13th, 2558

Kal'Shayar had decided to make his way out into the corridor, feeling somewhat thirsty and well aware of the recreational room nearby having a tap he could use. It was some surprise when the lights went out as he left the observation room. He immediately went to a stance of alertness as the guard out in the corridor let out a surprised gasp. The emergency lighting came on within seconds, small red lights sending pulsating glows throughout the underground facility, casting down eerie shadows.

There was no doubt in his mind that something serious had happened and that the security of the prisoner was in jeopardy. He turned to head towards the cell, the large room it was contained within accessible through a steel double door at the end of the corridor to his right. However at that point, he became aware of footsteps behind him. He turned around, watching as Javal emerged from the observation room behind him, looking a little surprised. Kal'Shayar was about to order him to find the squad, but he instead remained silent as his gaze went to the small blade that Javal gripped in his left hand. Combat training kicked in at that point as Javal lunged at him, hoping to plunge the blade into his chest.

Kig-Yar had decent low-light vision, giving them an advantage over humans in dim environments. Kal'Shayar and Javal shared this natural ability and could make each other out quite clearly, their yellow

eyes shining in the dark much like those of a cat. Kal'Shayar stepped backwards as the blade closed in on his chest, putting out one hand to deflect the thrust, catching Javal off-guard. The young Kig-Yar grunted in surprise but recovered quickly, planting a quick but powerful punch in Kal'Shayar's mid-section.

Kal'Shayar had the wind partially knocked out of him as the punch connected. He stepped back, aware that the human who had been standing guard outside the observation room now had his attention turned to the two fighting Kig-Yar. He went for his sidearm but Javal was a lot faster, sidestepping Kal'Shayar's next attack and lunging for the nearby human, sending the blade into the man's chest, piercing his heart. The guard let out another gasp before going limp, falling to the floor once Javal had removed the serrated blade. He turned around to face Kal'Shayar again, a look of anger visible on his face.

Kal'Shayar was about to ask why Javal was doing this but was forced to dodge another strike, ducking quickly as Javal swung his blade which in turn passed through the empty air Kal'Shayar had just been occupying. The Skirmisher did a quick somersault, rolling behind Javal and kicking him in the back of one leg, making him fall to his knees and emit a pained snarl. With his balance momentarily impaired, Kal'Shayar jumped back onto his feet and grabbed the hybrid from behind, wrapping an arm around his neck in order to put him into a tight headlock.

From further up the corridor there were the sounds of humans shouting, followed by a few gunshots. There then came about two loud thumps, undoubtedly caused by bodies hitting the floor, before the steel double-doors at the end of the corridor slid open. The two guards there were caught completely by surprise when Lev'Kanar stepped through the doorway, wielding a human-built pistol in each hand. He had obviously acquired both weapons from the guards that had been posted outside of his cell, as he had clearly escaped it somehow. While Kal'Shayar kept Javal held tightly at the neck, he watched with a growing feeling of dread as Lev'Kanar raised a pistol at each of the guards, one on either side of him. Pulling the trigger of each, he shot both guards, red blood splattering the walls near him. Both guards fell to the ground and remained there.

Lev'Kanar's gaze shifted towards the two fighting Kig-Yar further down the corridor. Kal'Shayar knew he had to act fast, forcing the blade out of Javal's grip before letting it fall into his free-hand. Clutching it tightly, he pressed it against Javal's neck, waiting for Lev'Kanar to approach.

His son knew better than to get close and instead he pointed one of his pistols towards him. Kal'Shayar wondered if he would be willing to actually shoot his own father, as he himself knew he might not be able to do such a thing to Lev'Kanar. His attention being momentarily diverted, Javal squirmed free of his grip a second before Lev'Kanar fired. The shot met its mark in Kal'Shayar's left shoulder, causing him to drop the knife before stumbling backwards, a sharp and burning pain erupting from the wound. His own blood ran down his chest and left arm while the arm itself fell limp. Within seconds painful muscle spasms had begun, causing Kal'Shayar to groan as he clutched the wound.

Javal picked up the dropped blade and set upon the wounded Skirmisher

within seconds. However, Lev'Kanar stepped towards him and pressed the barrel of one of his pistols in the younger one's back.

"Do not kill him," Lev'Kanar ordered. Javal had a look of disappointment on his face but otherwise listened. It was now clear to Kal'Shayar that Javal had not been trying to kill him simply because of the disagreements they had had in the past. Rather, it was because the hybrid was part of whatever group Lev'Kanar lead. He had been a plant right from the beginning, a fact that made Kal'Shayar wonder just how much more of this had been a set-up.

Kal'Shayar looked his son in the eyes but said nothing. What could he possibly say that would make the situation any better? Somehow Lev'Kanar had engineered his own escape, perhaps even as part of his plan. Kal'Shayar was certainly curious as to what this plan was, but he doubted he would get any proper answers.

"Why?" He asked directly.

Lev'Kanar said nothing. He simply nodded to Javal, whose face contorted into a Kig-Yar version of a grin before he turned back to face Kal'Shayar. He punched the wounded Skirmisher squarely across the jaw. It was a powerful blow, one that knocked free a few of Kal'Shayar's teeth and sent a wave of crippling pain across his skull. He slumped backwards against the wall behind him, dazed and barely conscious as Javal hit him again. This latest blow did send him into unconsciousness, as well as bruise his right eye socket.

\* \* \*

><p>Lev'Kanar regarded his unconscious, bruised and bloodied father with a complete lack of empathy. He did not wish to kill him, as he intended for his father to bear witness to what he would achieve, given time. As for Javal, who had seemed to enjoy knocking Kal'Shayar onto the ground, he was a reliable soldier who had done everything Lev'Kanar had ordered him to. He did not approve of Javal's attempts at killing Kal'Shayar, but there was no reason to dwell on the matter now that it had been dealt with.</p>

"How many in your squad are loyal?" Lev'Kanar asked.

"Five."

Lev'Kanar nodded in acknowledgement. It was half of the squad, though he had been hoping to do a bit better.

"Let us begin, then." Saying this, he started down the corridor, a pistol gripped in his each hand as they made their way through the underground complex. So far the security systems had failed to react to the escaped prisoner, much to Lev'Kanar's satisfaction. Things appeared to be working out as he had hoped, with the entire facility in disarray as a result of the sophisticated computer virus he had placed within the stolen AI. It had not taken much to acquire the services of a UNSC computer expert to help with the creation of the virus, nor had it taken much to dispose of him once his job was done.

The recreational room, a fairly standard affair with a few tables and chairs along with some computer terminals and vending machines, was

located past the far end of the corridor, around a corner. There was a human officer standing guard, dressed in the typical blue and grey uniform of the security personnel here. He had his pistol out, keeping watch for anything suspicious. Lev'Kanar shot him as they rounded the corner, sending him falling with a single carefully placed bullet to the head. Javal made his way into the room ahead of Lev'Kanar, with the Kig-Yar squad standing to within. They seemed at a loss on what to do with the main power out and red lights flashing, so they looked on to Javal as he walked inside, waiting for orders and some kind of explanation for the current situation.

Lev'Kanar followed

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><p>Javal inside the room and the younger Kig-Yar was quick to point out those who were loyal. Lev'Kanar shot all of the others, catching them off guard as he emptied both of his pistols into those who had refused to become part of the cause. With the five loyalists plus Javal, Lev'Kanar could start his task properly. He reloaded both of his guns before heading back out into the corridor, referring to the blueprints of the facility that he had memorized prior to being captured on Paradise Falls. He lead the group towards one of the elevators that lead back up to the surface. This particular elevator would take them directly into the main building.</p>

The corridor towards the elevator widened out a little, with about four guards standing at a security checkpoint. There was a walk-through scanner here, used to ensure those let into this part of the facility were not carrying weapons. It was no use to them now, as Lev'Kanar rounded the corner and began firing at the group. He caught them by surprise in the dim light, each muzzle flash casting a split second white glow down the corridor. The guards were cut down within seconds and once the smoke cleared Lev'Kanar reloaded both of his pistols again. He had always been fond of human weapons, as they were primitive yet effective and very reliable. They were also very accurate, allowing him to land almost every round he fired within the corridor. The four guards lay dead on the floor now, with one sprawled across a desk, the computer terminal having been knocked off. It lay on the floor, its screen broken.

Lev'Kanar strode through the scanner, an alarm sounding as he went past but being of little use. The elevator ahead would normally have been locked, requiring a keycard to access but the virus that was working its way through the facility's systems had ensured that such security measures were no longer functioning. Tapping a button on the control pad by the door, Lev'Kanar watched with a dispassionate gaze as the elevator opened. He was the first inside, followed by Javal and the others. They had since armed themselves with the weapons dropped by the dead humans, checking the pistols over as the elevator doors closed. Lev'Kanar pressed the appropriate button on the keypad inside and the elevator started on its gradual ascent, emerging from the underground facility and continuing upwards into the main building.

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><p>The lights went out when Caine was still talking to Admiral Vance, causing the two to stop and exchange glances with the two Spartans who were also in the room. The entire office had gone dark

and the lack of windows ensured that no natural light streamed in, making it feel as it if were the dead of night despite it being broad daylight outside. The darkness seemed ill-fitting for this time of day. This was somewhat rectified when the emergency lighting came on, small red lights switching on throughout this part of the building.<p>

"What the hell?" Vance sounded understandably confused, going for the intercom on his desk. That was not working either, hinting at something far more sophisticated than a power outage.

Leon had risen from his chair, alert. There was no logical reason for the power to have gone out, nor for the in-building communications to stop functioning as well. From what he could gather, the power outage was limited, as the steel double doors outside the office slid open. A few baffled looking officers emerged, some clearly members of the Security Council judging from their white uniforms and the security detail that followed them.

"I think it's best we evacuate the building," Leon suggested. He was not going to take any chances, even if an alarm was yet to go off.

"An evacuation? Why? I'm sure this is nothing but some kind of simple malfunction. I won't be surprised if the lights come back on in another five minutes." Vance checked the watch at his left wrist, as if beginning a countdown in his mind. He looked sceptical and without an actual alert sounding there was no real reason for a full evacuation.

An alarm siren did sound at that moment, causing everyone in the room to freeze. Leon looked at Vance, who did not look so sceptical anymore and instead started straight for the exit, walking out of the office while followed by a pair of armed guards who moved cautiously as they went for the double doors at the end of the corridor.

Those double doors slid open, with a worried looking Elise McGillon running inside. She saw Caine emerging from the office and jogged towards him, stopping a short distance in front of him. He regarded her with a curious gaze, waiting for what he assumed would be an explanation for whatever was going on. She must have run all the way here from the computer lab on the twentieth floor.

"General, we've got a problem," she said, smiling nervously when she realized just what an understatement that was. Caine was not amused, shooting the Commander a harsh frown.

"What is it, McGillon?" He asked.

"The AI...there was some sort of virus hard-coded inside it. Whatever it is, it's already deactivated all means of communication in and out of the building. It's killed the main power and deactivated the security systems."

Caine's eyes widened. He turned to Leon while Admiral Vance walked over, a worried grimace on his face.

"Lieutenant, take the Commander here and go down and check on the prisoner," Caine ordered. "I'll take Serena and we'll get the Security Council to an evacuation point on the ground."

"That's another problem," Elise said, getting another harsh glare from the General. "This virus, whatever it is...It's sealed off the exits on the ground. Unless you fancy jumping out of a tenth floor window, I might suggest using the landing pad on the roof to get out."

"The roof it is then." He paused, turning to face Leon again. "As I said, Lieutenant, take the Commander and any security guards you can and go down to the underground facility. Find the prisoner. It could be very likely that the bastard's escaped."

Leon nodded. If Lev'Kanar had indeed gotten out, it would give him the perfect opportunity to inflict some pain on the alien. He started for the doors at the end of the corridor while Elise followed a few steps behind. She was accompanied by three security guards. Caine and Serena began to escort Vance and the other Security Council members away, going through a set of double doors down an adjoining corridor that would lead deeper into the offices and towards more secure elevators.

The security checkpoint through the steel double doors was now unattended. The automated turret in the ceiling by the door remained dormant, but as Leon and Elise walked by the turret whirred into life. It came down out of the ceiling, rotating on a pivot while it scanned the passers-by. Leon saw it and realized that, if the security systems were indeed deactivated, why was this particular turret suddenly active?

He impulsively grabbed Elise, pushing her around the corner as the turret opened fire, its rotating barrel spewing bullets at an incredible rate. The rounds tore into the desk and the walls, causing explosions of plaster as Leon dived to the floor. The security guards who had been walking behind him were not so fortunate, the turret's incessant stream of bullets ripping the three of them to shreds. Leon crawled around the corner, the turret directing its attention to a startled female officer who had emerged from an office a short distance down the corridor. She was cut down before Leon had a chance to warn her, her bloodied body falling backwards into a glass window in the side of the office. She fell through it, crumpling against the desk behind, knocking over data-pads and a computer terminal while shards of glass rained upon her.

Elise stood around the corner, out of the turret's line of sight. Leon stood up once he had crawled around the corner to be with her, aware that she had a grateful look on her face.

"You pretty much saved my ass," she said.

"But not the others," Leon lamented, referring to the fallen security guards and the officer. He paused, taking a look around the room, noticing the corridor up ahead open onto the building's central expanse. He could hear screams and gunfire coming from out there, so he could only assume that the facility was under attack or the rest of its automated defences had turned against those inside (or both).

"Where's the nearest elevator into the underground complex?" Leon asked, looking at Elise. He assumed she had the answer, as right now he was mostly unfamiliar with this building and its layout.

"There's one further down there," she said, nodding in the direction of the corridor to their left.

Going that way would require getting past the turret again. Leon leaned around the wall, hearing the turret immediately spin on its pivot to face him. It let fly with a brief volley, ripping into the corner and forcing him to duck his head back again. The turrets here were very sensitive, maintained by an AI (one that had obviously become corrupted) and were loaded with hundreds of high-powered rounds. Their ammunition was limited, but Leon got the impression that this turret still had an awful lot of bullets left. He could not simply throw an item in its path in the hopes of distracting it. These things reacted to heat.

"Any better ways?" Leon asked, turning to look at Elise. She looked doubtful.

"There are just going to be more turrets elsewhere," she said. "And then there are the drones..."

Leon had almost forgotten about the drones. They were part of the same security network. If those heavy security drones were flying around shooting everyone then there would be a hell of a lot more people dying than he had originally suspected.

"We're just going to have to rush past," Leon said, knowing full well just how stupid this sounded. "I'll draw its fire while you go."

"You're crazy," Elise said, scowling. "That thing will tear us to pieces."

"Have you got any better ideas?"

Elise shook her head, somewhat reluctantly.

"Then just do what I say."

"I outrank you, Lieutenant. If anything, you should be doing what I say." Elise had raised an eyebrow, eyeing him with some noticeable irritation.

"And?"

She shrugged. Neither of them had any decent ideas at this point. Elise prepared herself to run across the short 'killzone' that the turret was guarding. It was traversable in a few steps, but those few steps would probably be enough for the turret to cut them down.

Before either of them could start running, there was a shout from somewhere nearby. Leon looked to where it had come from, recognizing the voice.

"Stay in cover!" Valerie Nevas had appeared at the far end of the hallway, her uniform dotted with patches of blood, none of which was her own. There was a grenade in her right hand, one which she had already pulled the pin from. Exposing herself momentarily, she tossed it down the corridor so that it arced past where Leon and Elise were

hiding and landed below the ceiling turret. Valerie stepped back into cover as the turret fired a volley at her, but the grenade went off before the turret could finish firing. The explosion obliterated the desk at the security checkpoint and blasted holes in the walls, exposing the wiring and piping within. The turret was nearly blown off of its pivot, hanging by a single weakened cable while sparks flew from the severed ones around it, rendering the entire turret defunct. With the turret down, Valerie was free to emerge from cover, making her way to where Leon and Elise had been hiding.

"Sergeant," Leon said, relieved to see that she was alright. "You have excellent timing."

Valerie smiled at him.

"Glad to help," she said. She regarded Elise with the same smile. "Are you going to thank me, Commander?"

Elise narrowed her gaze. It occurred to Leon that both women were yet to meet each other properly. They were in the same team, but worked in very different positions. It was clear that they knew each other to an extent, but from what Leon could tell, Elise was not particularly fond of Valerie.

"Thanks," she said sourly. Her gaze went to the corridor to their left. "We were headed to check on the prisoner. Since you're here Sergeant, you might consider coming along. Lev'Kanar might have escaped."

"Alright then." Valerie sounded remarkably at ease, given the current circumstances. "Do you think he has anything to do with this mess?"

"Definitely," Leon interjected. There was no doubt in his mind that Lev'Kanar was responsible for the current situation. He had stolen the AI, given it back to them and had somehow put a very well hidden virus within its coding. That virus was clearly wreaking havoc around the facility, the very same one he had been imprisoned in.

The trio made their way through the corridor, encountering another security checkpoint. This time there was no automated turret, fortunately, but there were two guards here who were standing alert. They both looked understandably worried, considering the chaos that was occurring throughout the building, compounded by the fact that communications had either been turned off or were being jammed, depending on the means. Leon approached the checkpoint, showing the guards his identification.

"We need to use that elevator," he said, nodding towards the secure elevator that sat just past the security checkpoint.

"Go ahead, sir," one of the guards said. He and his buddy lowered their weapons, relaxing noticeably. "What the hell is going on out there?"

Leon had no real answer to this, as he was not too sure himself. Valerie stepped forwards, providing her own response.

"Something's turned this building's defences against us," she said. "That means the drones out there, and the automated turrets, have

started shooting at everybody."

The guard nodded, a stunned expression on his face. It seemed likely and he and his associate would be remaining here for the duration of the emergency. Leon did not blame them, especially if what he had heard was true. If the exits on the lower levels were sealed off, as Elise had said, then there was little else they could go until someone from the outside broke in.

\* \* \*

><p>The underground facility was in as much chaos as the one above ground. The elevator had stopped and its doors had opened, allowing Leon, Valerie and Elise to emerge and survey the tunnel ahead. Elise seemed to know her way around, so Leon had no problem with her leading the way. So far, nothing seemed out of the ordinary save for the flashing red lights. A few guards were milling about, rushing off to secure their assigned areas. As for where the prisoner was being kept, things were a different story.</p>

Leon knew something was wrong when he saw the doors leading into the room where the cell was wide open. There was also the fact that two guards lay dead here, with another one lying outside of a recreational room down an adjoining corridor. While Valerie walked off to check things out in that direction, Leon and Elise made their way towards the observation room. Kal'Shayar lay against the wall, purple blood seeping out of a wound in his left shoulder. He was alive, clutching at the bleeding hole with one hand, his own blood coating the front of his armour. He looked up as the pair approached, with Elise rushing to his side.

"Kal," she said, worry evident in her voice. Leon had no problem with the friendship the pair had developed, although he doubted he would ever be able to form a similar one with any alien, especially with a member of one of the many species that had tried its hardest to exterminate humanity.

Kal'Shayar had a black eye, at least Leon thought it looked like one. The skin was far darker around the right eye, bruised and swollen. Someone had done quite a number on him and had gone as far as to shoot him through the shoulder.

Elise put an arm to the Skirmisher's back, pushing him so that he leaned forwards in order to provide a better view of the exit wound there.

"The shot went straight through," she said. "That's certainly a good thing." She pushed him back into place, taking a look around for first aid supplies. Unfortunately, none were within sight, although Leon was right to assume that there was a first aid kit inside the observation room. He made his way there, taking a look down into the cell through the window inside. Unsurprisingly, the cell was empty and the two guards who had been standing near it lay dead, their weapons taken. Now he was certain that Lev'Kanar was responsible for what was happening to the facility. The Skirmisher must have planned for this capture, ensuring that he was one step ahead of his enemies.

He made his way back to where Elise was kneeling by Kal'Shayar. From further up the corridor, Valerie appeared, walking over with a

confused look on her face.

"Half of the Kig-Yar squad has been killed," she said as she approached. "They'd been gunned down in the rec room." She glanced at Kal'Shayar, watching as Elise took the first aid kit from Leon and opened it.

"What happened to him?" She asked.

Elise had started to clean up the blood, applying pressure to the wound on both sides in order to stop the bleeding. It was easy to guess that blood-loss was just as deadly for Kig-Yar as it was for humans.

"My son...he escaped." Kal'Shayar squirmed where he sat, being in obvious discomfort.

This much was obvious. Leon was now trying to work out just what it was Lev'Kanar intended to do. He must have been the only Kig-Yar on Earth, along with Kal'Shayar and those who were in his squad. There were not a lot of places he could go, but considering his level of preparation up to this point, it seemed likely he had an escape plan already laid out.

"He had help from Javal," Kal'Shayar croaked. "The lights went out and the security locks on the doors deactivated. How did that happen?" He looked to the humans for answers. Elise was the one to oblige as she placed a field dressing on the exit wound.

"A computer virus," she said simply. "A very well-hidden and very sophisticated computer virus."

Kal'Shayar groaned from the pain as Elise pressed a bit too hard on the bullet hole in his shoulder.

"I know how he thinks. I taught him much of what he knows. He always liked to be one step ahead of everyone else. He always had a talent for knowing what people were thinking. Pure intuition." Kal'Shayar slowly rose to his feet, with Elise standing up with him. She placed a field dressing on the wound at his chest before turning her attention to his black eye, though his blue-black skin made the bruising appear far less pronounced.

"There is no doubt in my mind that he had this planned from the beginning."

Leon doubted this, but given what he had experienced with Lev'Kanar in the past, it did seem likely. The fact that he had been able to steal a military AI, having set-up the perfect set of circumstances to acquire one, spoke somewhat of his capacity for creating elaborate schemes.

"You think this whole thing is just part of a really complicated plan?" Valerie sounded disbelieving. This was understandable, given what Kal'Shayar was implying.

"Yes." Kal'Shayar flexed his left arm but visibly winced as a result. "He wanted to be sent here. The more I think about it, the more I believe it."

"I think your boy's just a bit crazy," Valerie said. "He has a grudge against humans, which is understandable given what happened with his family." She paused, reminded again of the part she had played in that event. After a moment, she continued: "What does he hope to achieve here, in the heart of the UNSC? He's just one Kig-Yar with a few followers."

"Sometimes, all it takes is one," Leon commented. He had been thinking of the connections that had brought them together. He had been crippled by Lev'Kanar months before on a botched mission. Valerie was responsible for the death of Lev'Kanar's family. Kal'Shayar was Lev'Kanar's father. They had all been put into the same team at a point when they had not been certain of the identity of their enemy. Leon did not believe in coincidences, certainly not ones of that magnitude.

"This is the heart of the UNSC," Elise said, a worried look crossing her face. She closed the first aid kit, having done what she could to tend to Kal'Shayar's wounds. The time for proper medical treatment would come later, if they survived the day. "The Security Council was brought here for an emergency meeting. They obviously think that Lev'Kanar and his followers are enough of a threat to do this."

"We should not waste anymore time," Kal'Shayar said.

The Skirmisher had a point. Nonetheless, Leon was curious to hear what else Elise had to say.

"If Lev'Kanar planned to be sent here, why do you think he would do that? He's crippled our defences here with a virus. He's escaped from his cell and is now on the loose. Where could he be going? What's he going to do out there?"

"The Security Council," Leon said with realization. It was beginning to all come together now. "They're all here. The people who run the UNSC are all in this facility. They're trapped up in the main building. Caine and Serena are with them, but with the automated defences turned against everyone I doubt they're safe."

"And my son is making his way to them right now," Kal'Shayar said, his tone grave.

"He might just hate humanity enough to pull a stunt like this," Leon continued. "If he can take out the Security Council, it would cause massive unrest. This could become one of the worst terrorist attacks in history."

"We've got to stop him," Valerie said.

Leon and the others started back for the elevator. Though he was certain Caine and Serena knew what they were doing, there was no way they would be aware of Lev'Kanar and his followers intent on intercepting them and the Security Council members. There was no way to know if they were safe, as the security systems would most likely be seeking out the Security Council members specifically. Lev'Kanar most likely had the means to avoid being shot at by the very defences he had turned against them, something that would be of no surprise to Leon given how well he had planned things so far.

It was now a race against time and Leon was determined to win

it.

## 19. Coup

\*\*Coup\*\*

February 13th, 2558

The central plaza was a warzone. Bloodied bodies were littered across the floor, some scorched and others having simply been shot into ribbons. Smoke wafted from fires that had erupted in the central, the air thick with the smell of burning flesh. Security drones buzzed about, with one pausing several metres above the floor before letting fly with a volley from both of its machines guns, one located under each wing. The rounds cut down an officer who had emerged from a nearby corridor. He had foolishly stumbled into the open, unwitting to the presence of the security drones.

The drones were machines, free of any emotion and doing only what they were programmed to do. The virus that had gotten into the facility's systems had reprogrammed them to attack just about everyone, even those who were unarmed. They were systematically moving through the building, surveying each floor in turn, cutting down anyone who stumbled into their field of view. The main building's interior was now a complete wreck and strewn with corpses. Many of those who were still alive had begun to head for the upper floors, but even now the security drones were working their way further up the building.

Leon was unarmed, much to his chagrin. He stood in cover by the main reception desk, eyeing a pair of the drones as they flew over the plaza. He was accompanied by Valerie, Elise and the Skirmisher Kal'Shayar. Only Valerie was armed in this group, though the specific reason why they had arrived at the ground floor was to gain access to the security room located near the front reception. That room was off to one side of the large reception area, with a solid steel door and several thick windows that had since been shot to pieces by the security drones. The security personnel who had been within lay scattered about inside and outside the security offices, all of them dead. It was unlikely they would be able to deactivate the drones and automated turrets from that room, as the problem lay with the AI that ran the facility's systems, but there would be weapons kept in the armoury inside the secure area. Accessing the armoury would be no problem judging from the look of the scene, as the door into the security room was wide open and the windows in it were broken.

The pair of drones flying over the plaza disappeared from view, heading into a corridor about a dozen floors up. Leon directed the others to dash for the security room before he himself followed suit. The security room had several computer monitors inside, most of them displaying surveillance feeds. Elise made her way over to one of the computers, tapping away at its keyboard as she attempted to get some idea of where the Security Council was located. The adjoining armoury had been left wide open, with one guard lying dead near the doorway, riddled with bloodied holes.

Kal'Shayar was still clutching the wound at his shoulder. It had been bandaged up but was still enough to seriously impair his movement, but nonetheless he made his way into the armoury and took one of the

side-arms from the racks inside. Taking his right hand away from his wound, he loaded the pistol and took a few spare magazines. Valerie took a few spare assault rifle magazines, clipping them to her belt while Leon walked up to one of the closed cabinets.

The cabinet was unlocked, allowing him to open it and view the weapons contained within. They were just what he had been looking for and he was filled with a sense of satisfaction as he grabbed one of the shotguns on display and a box of shells from a shelf below it. He spent a moment loading the weapon, jamming eight shells inside it before switching off the weapon's safety and working the pump. He took a small black pouch from inside the cabinet and clipped it to his belt before he took a handful of the shotgun shells and dropped them inside, filling the pouch up to the brim with the rounds before closing it.

Elise turned around, nodding towards the surveillance feed displays.

"I've found the Security Council members," she said. "There's about ten of them, being escorted by a few guards and the General. The Lieutenant-Commander's with them as well. They're on the one-hundred and fiftieth floor."

Leon looked at the feeds. One did show a corridor on an upper floor, with the General leading a group of uniformed men and women along while about three guards and the unmistakable sight of the Spartan-II, Serena, followed them from behind. They did not appear to be in any trouble just yet, but it was unlikely things would remain that way for very long.

"We should intercept them," Leon said. "They could use our support."

Elise walked over to the armoury and took a submachine gun. With the group properly armed, she then walked back over to the computer. Tapping at a few keys with her free hand, she frowned and shook her head.

"Usually the cops would be here by now, but something's been blocking all communications out of the facility," she said. "The only way we'll get help is if we run into the city and tell people in person. It's likely this virus has worked its way into the city-wide network, but I can't find out the specifics from this terminal. If we're going to purge the system we're going to need to reach the AI core."

"The Security Council is our top priority," Leon said. "Once they're safe, we can evacuate the rest of the survivors and notify the authorities outside. That way we can come back in with reinforcements and clean things up."

Elise nodded. There was no way to find out whether this virus was having a major effect on the surrounding city; whether or not it had disrupted the operations of the local authorities. As far as she could tell, as well as drawing on her somewhat base knowledge of computers, it appeared that the computer virus, or 'worm' as it was properly called, was isolated to the facility.

Through the smashed windows of the office that looked out towards the plaza, a security drone flew into view. It hovered in place about

five metres off of the floor, its single large red sensor 'eye' moving slowly about within its socket. That eye became directed towards the office, with the rest of the drone rotating to face it. Leon saw this and immediately felt a rush of adrenaline as he heard the drone's machine guns spin into action.

"Get down!" He shouted, causing all four of them to hit the floor. The armour plating within the walls of the security room did help to absorb most of the rounds, though plenty more came through the windows, tearing up the inside of the room even more. Computers and surveillance feed displays exploded around them, showering sparks and glass fragments.

Leon rolled onto his back, clutching his shotgun tightly as he waited for the drone to stop firing. It did just this before it began to hover towards them, the hum of its fast moving in-built propellers enough to tell Leon that it was coming straight for them. He jumped onto his feet with a single athletic action, ignoring the dull pain that erupted from his lower back as he brought up his shotgun and pulled the trigger, sending a blast through the smashed window ahead of him and straight into the right-side wing of the security drone. It was knocked off of its axis momentarily, metal plating flying off of its wing from the force of the shot. However, its armour was more than enough to keep it functioning, and it recovered quickly. It opened fire with its machine guns again.

Leon fired another shot as white-hot tracer rounds streaked by him. This shot hit the drone's red sensor 'eye' dead-on, blowing it apart and sending forth a shower of sparks. The drone spun in place, blinded and confused. It kept firing its machine guns as it spun around wildly, sending bullets every which-way. This continued for about twenty seconds while the group remained low within the security office. The drone's guns fell silent when it had exhausted its ammunition banks, yet the high-pitched whirring sound of the rotating guns spinning could still be heard. After a moment, the drone fell to the floor, deactivated. It clanked loudly upon the tiles, a jagged hole torn through its front by Leon's weapon fire.

Standing up, Leon regarded his handiwork from a distance with grim satisfaction. Valerie, Elise and Kal'Shayar rose to their feet as well. Elise looked somewhat relieved while Valerie had a grin on her face, patting Leon on the back. Out of all of them, she appeared to be enjoying this situation the most.

"Very nice, Lieutenant," she said.

Leon simply nodded in acknowledgement. There was little time to waste, so he vaulted through the empty space where the window had once been and began to head towards one of the nearby corridors. The others followed, spreading out. Leon decided against using one of the elevators in the plaza as doing so would make them an easy target for any patrolling drones. Instead, he made his way through one of the corridors ahead, passing by some shot-up offices. There was another elevator here and the door slid open after Leon manipulated the control panel by its doors. The group walked inside before Leon pressed a button for one of the higher floors.

The elevator's doors closed, giving the group a brief reprieve. Leon glanced at the others, trying to get a sense of how they were feeling. Elise looked calm and collected, standing near Kal'Shayar.

Leon had never seen her in combat before, being more used to her role as the one giving him orders through a radio while he was on the ground. Judging from her record, Leon knew he could rely on her despite the issues she had had with past superiors. Kal'Shayar, on the other hand, appeared weary. The bandages over his shoulder wound were soaked with dark purple blood and he was leaning against the back wall of the elevator, breathing slowly. It was clear he was in discomfort, no longer in top-form. Leon had seen how the Skirmisher had fought on Paradise Falls and had been somewhat impressed.

Kal'Shayar had the speed and grace of a well-trained acrobat, yet was as dispassionate in combat as some of the hardest soldiers. This contrasted with how he appeared now, looking barely conscious, his eyes sometimes closing before he forced himself to keep them open, fighting against his gradually reducing strength. Elise was facing him, her face wrinkled with concern.

Valerie was handling herself quite well, a quality that Leon could only admire. If only he could enjoy this as much as she was, but he had since gone past that stage of his life, where getting into a fight thrilled him. It still did, in some minor way, but the war with the Covenant had sapped most of that feeling away. During that war, he had spent most of his fights simply trying to survive. There was not much to enjoy about fighting for sheer survival. Such thoughts got him thinking about whether he may even survive today. The security drones and automated turrets were dangerous, perhaps too dangerous. It was all fine when they worked for those who had built them, enforcing security at a place like this, but with them turned against their creators they made very dangerous opponents. There was no emotion behind what they did, just the cold logic of a computer.

Leon's train of thought was broken when the elevator stopped and the doors slid open, revealing a corridor lined with offices that were relatively intact. There was a dead guard lying partway down the corridor with a single bullet in his back, indicating that something more than security drones had been through here.

"I get the feeling Lev'Kanar might be ahead of us," Leon said, stepping out of the elevator with his shotgun held up. He checked the corridor ahead, and then the one to his right. Elise was to his left, keeping watch on that approach as they walked away from the elevator.

Kal'Shayar was a bit slow, stepping out of the elevator with a pistol clutched in his right hand. His left arm hung limply by his side and blood had begun to seep out from under the bandages at his wound.

"Lieutenant..." He rasped. Leon turned around, noticing how pale his dark skin had become. "I feel weak. Too weak." He leaned against the nearest wall in order to support himself. Elise walked over to him, using one hand to lift up the bandage on the wound at his front. It was soaked through with his blood, causing her already worried gaze to become even more serious.

"He needs proper medical attention," Elise said, glancing back at Leon. "If I could get hold of some coagulating agent from a sick bay anywhere..." She trailed off, frowning worriedly. "Well, I did apply some from the first aid kit earlier, but it clearly doesn't work too well with his species. I need something more sophisticated."

"Stay here with him," Leon said.

Kal'Shayar seemed reluctant to do this.

"I can keep going," he said, but it was clear he was in no state to continue. "If my son and his followers reach your people..."

"The Sergeant and I will stop them," Leon interrupted, determined to do just this. Lev'Kanar had already caused enough trouble.

"There's a landing pad on this floor," Elise said. "That's probably where the General and the others are headed. Try and intercept them. I'll go with Kal and try and find a sickbay. There's bound to be one around here somewhere."

"Be careful, Commander," Leon said. He would hate to see anything happen to her. They were 'friends', at least in his eyes. As for Kal'Shayar, he had come to respect the alien warrior, to a degree. He still did not completely trust him, but his fighting abilities were the sort to be admired.

Leon started down the corridor, followed by Valerie. Kal'Shayar took himself away from the wall, still a bit unsteady on his feet but able to move well enough to follow Elise as she started down a different passageway.

\* \* \*

><p>General Caine had been escorting most of the Security Council since the trouble had begun, assisted by Serena. By 'most' of the Security Council, it appeared that there were still several others missing. It was likely that they were dead or in hiding, but there was no real way to be certain. This left about ten members of the Council, most of them middle-aged men and women in white uniforms who each represented some branch of the UNSC. They were mostly the types of people Caine made a habit of avoiding, especially the bureaucratic ones. The only one he knew to a decent extent was Admiral Vance and he was the one who had been complaining for most of their escape through the offices.</p>

There was a landing pad attached to this floor, jutting from the side of the building. It served a secondary function, used to ferry in personnel now and again. There was an even larger, more sophisticated set of landing facilities on the top of the building but getting up there might prove to be even trickier. As it stood, the most logical means of escape was on one of the Pelican drop-ships sitting on the secondary landing pad.

From what Caine had gathered, the building's security systems had been turned against them. He and the rest of the group had been forced to avoid automated turrets and security drones, as well as the smaller surveillance drones. Though the surveillance drones were incapable of causing harm, they would simply alert the security drones to the presence of potential targets. Caine had needed to shoot a couple down with his sidearm earlier. Up on these higher floors, there were less of them but even now, as the group ducked inside yet another office, he could hear the hums and whines of airborne security drones. They were buzzing around outside the building, zooming by the windows on occasion. He had seen them

working their way from the ground up in a very systematic fashion, as was to be expected from machines. On these higher floors, with their reinforced windows and walls (for security purposes, naturally) there was nother type of drone to be on the lookout for: the 'prowlers'. That was their nickname, given to them because of the way they patrolled the office corridors, keeping a watchful eye on those within. There were usually at least two on each floor, with actual human guards making up the bulk of the security forces up here. The prowlers were about five feet tall, fitted with dual machine guns. They moved about on tank-style treads. There was no doubt in the General's mind that the computer virus that had turned the security systems against the building's inhabitants had affected the prowlers as well.

The group were scattered through two offices as one of these prowlers came wheeling by, whirring along on its treads. Its upper half rotated on an axis as it stopped and surveyed the area around it. Caine knew that the group were ill-equipped to deal with such a thing. Most of the Security Council members had armed themselves but these arms consisted of mostly pistols that had been acquired from fallen guards.

Admiral Vance was crouched behind the same desk as Caine, watching the prowler as it came rolling by the office. The two of them were shielded from its view, but it would be only a matter of time before it saw either them or the other people in the group.

"What do we do?" Vance asked, running a hand through his greying hair. Beads of sweat dripped down his forehead, more of a sign of nervousness than of simply being warm.

"We wait," Caine replied.

Vance did not like the sound of this judging from the way he shook his head.

"That's it? What happens when it finds us?"

"We improvise," Caine said.

"Damn it General, I say we all hit it at the same time. We should be able to take it out if we hit it hard and fast."

"Maybe." It could work, but Caine did not have much faith in the people on the Security Council. Most had military backgrounds, but most had also spent much of their careers sitting behind desks than actually going out on missions and getting into fire-fights.

From somewhere up ahead, there was the sound of weapons fire. The prowler stopped where it was in the corridor before it turned around to face the direction of the sound. Caine watched, worried for a moment that someone within the group had been discovered, but it was quite the opposite. Instead, a single shaft of red light shot from the other end of the corridor. Caine could not see the shooter from where he was, but he did recognize the sort of beam fired to emanate from an M6 Grindell laser cannon, or 'Spartan Laser' as it was more colloquially known. The prowler was hit dead on by the sudden beam and the entire top half of the machine exploded, sending smouldering chunks of metal flying in all directions.

Vance looked understandably surprised, though Caine was confident as he stood up and walked out into the corridor. Serena was crouched in an office across the hall, along with several members of the Security Council. She exchanged glances with the General and walked out into the corridor with him, keeping her pistol held in a ready position.

Lev'Kanar stood at the far end of the hallway with the laser cannon perched on one shoulder. He lowered the weapon, handing it to another Kig-Yar, Javal, who stood to his left. With both hands free (but two pistols stowed at his waist) he walked towards the General, his species' version of a smile reaching his mouth.

"I did not expect you would survive, General," Lev'Kanar said. Javal and about five other Kig-Yar started making their way through the adjoining corridors, working their way around the group.

Vance emerged from cover, as did some of the other people on the Security Council. He looked at Caine and then to Lev'Kanar, a mix of anger and confusion appearing on his face.

"What the hell is going on, General?" Vance barked, anger in his voice. "Just shoot the bastard and his buddies."

"I wasn't planning on getting killed today," Caine said. He got the feeling that all eyes were on him. Even now, Lev'Kanar's followers were flanking them. Still, he was calm. It was what he had been expecting after all.

"What of your friend?" Lev'Kanar's gaze went to Serena. She remained still, watching the Skirmisher carefully.

"She's with me."

Vance was fuming by this point. Clearly, he had not been expecting the General to take the time to have a leisurely conversation with the enemy.

"Fucking hell, General," he said, preparing to raise his pistol. "If you're not going to shoot this son of a bitch, then I will."

Caine swivelled around where he stood and shot the Admiral then and there. He did not feel a hint of remorse and as he watched the Admiral fall backwards with a bloody red stain forming at his chest, the General realized that he had never liked the Admiral. The man was a self-important, old-fashioned buffoon who had interfered with his operations on more than one occasion. It was satisfying, seeing him fall to the floor with his eyes wide open in surprise.

This was apparently the signal for the Kig-Yar flanking them to open fire. The Security Council members did not stand a chance as the half a dozen aliens charged into the offices, gunning them down within seconds. It was a massacre, one that the General had been looking forward to for some time. Serena watched on dispassionately and said nothing. There was a reason Caine had chosen this Spartan and not any of the others.

Lev'Kanar walked up to him, looking smug as he so often did.

"That's most of them," Caine said. "I want to ask, though: have you

seen any of the other team members?"

"No," Lev'Kanar said. "I spared my father, as I wish him to witness the changes that will occur in the wake of these events. As for any of the others, they have not been found. They could very well be dead."

"You spared Kal'Shayar?" Caine frowned. "Where is he?"

"Indisposed. If you wish him dead, then I can arrange it."

Caine nodded in the affirmative. It was surprising, finding a son so willing to murder his father. There had been something special about Lev'Kanar from the moment he had met the Skirmisher. This whole plan had been in the works for over a year. With most of the Security Council dead, Caine was free to use his influence to find the appropriate scapegoats and begin the crusade he had been planning ever since the war had ended.

"Then go and arrange it," Caine said. He then regarded the scene around him, surrounded by several dead bodies, all of them once important individuals in the UNSC. He could see himself making history, being the one to lead humanity back into its prime in the wake of a devastating alien terrorist attack, perpetrated by a certain group of Kig-Yar extremists. Of course, killing those extremists was not part of the plan. No, they would 'escape' and never be found. There was already fabricated evidence waiting to be released, pinning the whole thing on a certain Sangheili Major who would be arrested within a few hours. Then the whole thing would be tied back to Rel Valum, his commander, who in turn would link it back to the whole Sangheili military. It was more than enough to cause quite a stir amongst the general population. Perhaps enough to even ignite another war. Caine would have preferred to employ Sangheili to carry out this attack, but they were notoriously hard to work with. Kig-Yar were a whole lot easier, as they were very much like humans, complete with the notion of greed. They liked money and power just as much as humans did. Lev'Kanar had even had a motive as well, one that Caine had been able to use.

"He may have escaped," Lev'Kanar said.

"Then find him. And Lieutenant Leon, as well as Sergeant Nevas and Commander McGillon. And if we can't find them, we'll implicate them in this whole affair." He paused, grinning the thought of what was essentially a mission success. "In the meantime, keep out of sight. I'll get someone onto purging the computer systems clean. We've got a lot of work ahead of us."

Caine could already see the media's portrayal of the attack playing out in his head. Alien extremists with ties to a renegade Sangheili Major with a well-known dislike of humans. The conspiracy theorists would go crazy over this, but a healthy supply of disinformation would ensure they never became a threat.

\* \* \*

><p>Kal'Shayar felt far weaker than he would have preferred, aware that his bullet wound was bleeding profusely. Elise was helping him along, taking him through the offices, hoping to find some sort of medical room. Unfortunately, the pair stumbled upon the General,

watching from inside a nearby office as Caine and Lev'Kanar exchanged pleasantries. It was a shocking sight for Elise, who had since come to trust the General and follow his orders. Seeing him in cahoots with the enemy completely shattered her opinion of the man. As for Kal'Shayar, he had little to say on the matter, instead trying to keep himself steady despite the weak feeling in his legs. His head hurt greatly, a result of the beating he had received earlier, while the bullet wound in his left shoulder was sending bursts of pain down his entire left arm. Seeing his son talking to the General only made it clear to him that this entire thing had been an elaborate set-up. Lev'Kanar had always been meant to be captured and sent here. Now the human Security Council members lay dead, their bodies scattered around the offices nearby. Both Kal'Shayar and Elise remained around a nearby corner, watching the pair through the windows on the office between them.<p>

Lev'Kanar's followers were also in view, standing guard around the area. After a minute or so, both Lev'Kanar and General Caine headed off, disappearing from sight. The Kig-Yar followers accompanied them, fanning out as they went, covering multiple hallways. This included the one Kal'Shayar and Elise were standing in, with Javal coming around a corner behind them.

The hybrid went to shout to the others but Kal'Shayar spun around, pulling the trigger on his pistol. He fired three rounds, all three of which collided with Javal, sending forth spurts of dark purple blood that caused the hybrid to fall backwards, screeching in pain. The gunfire and the screech was enough to alert the others, with the rest of Lev'Kanar's followers appearing up ahead.

Kal'Shayar pushed Elise into cover before turning to face their attackers, firing off a few shots, aware that some rounds came very close to hitting him. The wooden wall behind him exploded with each shot that impacted, sending splinters of wood flying everywhere. Kal'Shayar dived after Elise, hitting the floor on his left side which only exacerbated the pain in his shoulder. He let out a pained grunt, watching as Elise grabbed him by his right arm and began to pull him into better concealment.

The plan to find him some better medical attention had clearly been put on the backburner. They had five experienced Kig-Yar soldiers working their way towards them, moving in from both flanks. Elise noted a sign on the wall that pointed to the landing pad, but to get there they would have to get past their attackers.

"I will cover you from here," Kal'Shayar said, sitting up as he gazed at Elise. He would only slow her down with his injuries. "Get yourself to the landing pad."

"I'll be damned if I'm leaving you behind," she said, looking as determined as ever. She grabbed him by the arm again and helped him to his feet, putting an arm around him as they made their way out into the corridor. There was one of the Kig-Yar soldiers out here, mere metres away. Elise raised her submachine gun and let fly with a rapid-fire volley, sending several of the armour-piercing rounds straight into the Kig-Yar. This soldier, a female from what Kal'Shayar could tell, stumbled and convulsed with each bullet that hit her. She let out a pained shriek before hitting the floor, landing in a pool of her own blood. With her down, both Elise and Kal'Shayar started up the hallway.

\* \* \*

><p>Leon and Valerie had made their way through most of the floor, moving past offices as they worked their way towards the landing pad. Somehow, they found themselves on the landing pad before Caine and the Security Council. The wind up here was fairly strong, billowing across the pad and whistling in-between the pylons underneath. Behind them the main building continued for another sixty floors or so while below, the rest of the compound and the city of Sydney spread out well into the horizon. Police cars surrounded the perimeter of the compound while security drones flew about the building.</p>

From somewhere back inside there was the sound of weapons fire. Deciding to head back in to investigate, the shooting stopped but they came face-to-face with Caine, who was trailed by Lev'Kanar. They halted in a conference room, regarding each other with varying degrees of surprise. The large windows on one side of the room provided a breathtaking view of the city, with the landing pad a short way to the right.

"General?" Leon had his shotgun raised, Valerie with her assault rifle clutched at the hip. Aiming properly was not particularly necessary in these close quarters.

"Lieutenant," Caine said, giving his usual friendly grin. Lev'Kanar remained silent, though his clawed fingers drifted close to the pistols he wore at his waist. "I was beginning to think you might be dead."

"Step aside, General," Leon said. He already had a good idea of why Lev'Kanar was with the General, but part of him did not want to believe it. He noticed Serena creeping her way into the conference room to his right, her intentions clear as she moved behind the table and held her sidearm at the ready.

There was gunfire from somewhere behind them, causing Leon and the others to look in that direction momentarily. A dead Kig-Yar fell from around a corner at the end of the corridor, riddled with bullets. Elise stepped into view after it, followed by Kal'Shayar whom she had an arm around. She saw Leon and the others and immediately began shouting.

"They killed the Security Council! The General's working with Lev!"

Leon went to pull the trigger on his shotgun but Lev'Kanar was fast, diving to one side and rolling all the while his hands pulled the pistols from his waist. Caine bolted around a corner while Serena opened fire, a few of the rounds tearing straight through the wooden wall on Leon's right.

Valerie began to back away as she raised her assault rifle and pulled the trigger, swivelling around as she fired, sending rifle rounds pounding across the room. The glass table shattered as the bullets tore through it, causing Serena to hit the floor. Leon began to back away out of the room and down the corridor, heading for the landing pad. To only complicate matters further, a security drone appeared at the windows of the conference room, its large red sensor 'eye' looking directly at him.

Outgunned, Leon turned around and began to run. Elise let go of Kal'Shayar and started shooting at the General, who ducked and returned fire, causing her to step through a nearby doorway in order to get out of his line of sight. The security drone spun up its machine guns and sent rounds tearing through the windows and walls, ripping it apart as Leon ran out onto the landing pad. He was followed by Valerie, who had emptied the last of the rounds in her current assault rifle magazine and was now fumbling to reload.

Lev'Kanar was considerably more confident than the others, directing his attention towards his father who had ducked around a corner at the end of the corridor. The pair exchanged fire, with Lev'Kanar diving across the width of the hall and firing both pistols, sending rounds pounding into the wall around Kal'Shayar. He paused for a moment to reload while his father opted to head the other way, working around the side of the nearest office and in the process flanking Serena.

The female Spartan heard him coming and turned around as he stepped into view. Kal'Shayar saw her and the security drone hovering outside. Raising their pistols, they both went to fire but unfortunately they were both out of ammunition. Kal'Shayar saw that the security drone was turning around to face him, so without a whole lot of thought (anymore and he might have doubted his plan) he started to run. He dived across the remains of the conference table before Serena could react, heading straight for where the windows had once been. He hit the floor and quickly rolled onto his feet before traversing the short distance remaining between the table and the windows. He was not as steady on his feet as he would have preferred but it was more than enough for him to jump the short distance between the broken windows and the security drone. He hit the side of the drone hard and his hands scrambled for something to hold, ending with him hanging off of the side of the drone as it struggled to right itself under his weight. His pistol had fallen from his grip, plummeting to the earth below.

His left shoulder erupting with agony, he was forced to pull himself up with his right arm, climbing on top of the airborne drone while the wind billowed around him. On the landing pad nearby, both Leon and Valerie had run for cover by one of the parked Pelican drop-ships. Katherine was making her way through the offices, hoping to get by the General and Lev'Kanar. Kal'Shayar saw that he had the best vantage point, so he set to work on the drone.

Using both hands, he ripped off a panel on the drone's top, letting it fall into the wind and start on the very long fall below. Serena had reloaded her pistol, clearly unthreatened by the drone as it was apparently programmed to ignore her. Nonetheless, she started shooting at Kal'Shayar, unable to get a clean shot on the Skirmisher as he lay flat against the top of the airborne drone, with bullets whizzing by. A few hit the front of the machine but were deflected, pinging off elsewhere.

Kal'Shayar saw wires and circuit boards under the panel he had removed, but there was nothing he could make sense of. Nonetheless, he started ripping out the wires, pulling away some of the circuit boards while he was at it. He also ripped away some more of the panelling, revealing some sort of small control pad that was now

flashing red, a result of his tampering. He tapped a few of the buttons, only for the guns to start firing after he hit a particular button. This was what he needed as he pulled the drone slightly, forcing it to turn into Serena's direction.

The Spartan was up and running as the machine guns tore apart the conference room, ripping the expensive grey carpet to pieces and blasting holes through the walls. General Caine was also dangerously close to the field of fire and ran in the opposite direction, allowing Elise to race past and rush out onto the landing pad. With her out of the way, Kal'Shayar was free to turn the guns into the direction of his son. He no longer cared about sparing his son's life and knew that it was for the greater good if he died. The amount of deaths he was responsible for today was unforgiveable.

However, the machine guns ran out of ammunition after a few seconds of firing. With no other option, Kal'Shayar stood up on the unsteady drone and turned to face the nearby landing pad. Using his natural agility, he jumped, landing on the cement of the landing pad and running for where Leon and the others were. Elise had made her way to one of the Pelicans and was climbing into the cockpit while Leon and Valerie provided cover fire. The two were crouched behind some metal crates, with Lev'Kanar standing in cover by the door that lead onto the landing pad. He would occasionally lean around it and fire off a few shots.

As Elise started the Pelican's engines she lowered the craft's rear ramp. Both Leon and Valerie made their way into the Pelican, with Kal'Shayar trailing a short distance behind. As they ran on board, Lev'Kanar came striding out onto the landing pad, firing shots in their direction. Bullets ricocheted off of the Pelican's armour but did little else. Elise closed the rear ramp once the others had climbed on board.

Kal'Shayar slumped into a seat in the back of the Pelican, the adrenaline no longer working through his system. Instead, he passed out, feeling almost glad to have the opportunity for rest. Outside, Caine and Lev'Kanar watched as the Pelican ascended before flying off across the city. Neither of them said anything, as both knew what the escape of that particular group meant.

## 20. Safehouse

\*\*Safehouse\*\*

February 13th, 2558

\_ "Earlier today, the UNSC came under attack from alien terrorists, ones who were aided by human insiders. The headquarters facility in Sydney was attacked in a well-coordinated assault that utilized the building's security system, turning it against those within. Hundreds were killed, including many of those on the Security Council. However, those responsible did not get away completely. Surveillance footage and eyewitness accounts have identified several of those involved.\_

\_ "As of now, the Security Council has been disbanded and replaced with an Emergency Management Council. Earth is now in a state of high alert, as we anticipate further attacks. One of those responsible, a

Sangheili, has been arrested and his people's governing body is yet to comment on the situation. I, General Nathaniel Caine, will be in charge of this Emergency Management Council. The entire city of Sydney and the rest of New South Wales is to be sealed off from the outside world, with communications from and to outside blocked, save for those with special permission. Travel is to be strictly controlled in and out of the state. This is simply a precautionary measure, as those who we believe to be responsible for the attack are still at large. They include three humans and one Kig-Yar. Their descriptions have been forwarded to all local authorities and are available on the network. If you see any of these individuals, report the sighting to the authorities right away.\_

\_ "I believe that these attacks are a result of anti-human movements within the Kig-Yar and Sangheili peoples. I have already ordered vessels to be dispatched to the borders of human space, as I anticipate that this attack and any subsequent ones will be the precursor to a full scale invasion. We will be sure to let these aliens know that the human race is not so easily shaken. We survived the last war, and we will survive the next one. Our species will endure.\_

\_ "This is General Nathaniel Caine, Acting Leader of the Emergency Management Council. People of Earth, remember: stay safe, stay smart. Stay secure. I fear the following months will test our resolve. If the Sangheili and the Kig-Yar wish to conquer our empire, I say: let them try. And let it be known to any of them who might be watching this broadcast: any movements of any vessels near our worlds will be considered a hostile act. These vessels will have the option to surrender and if they accept, they will be boarded and searched. They will be fired upon if suspected of aiding these terrorists.\_

\_ "The human interstellar empire has endured for centuries and it will not bow to the whims of extremists. Be prepared for more announcements in the following weeks, as we will need to enact new laws to ensure the security of our worlds. For the protection of humanity as a species, I suggest citizens accept these coming changes.\_

\_ "And with that, people of Earth and its colonies, I bid you goodnight from Sydney, Australia."  
\* \* \*

><p>"You owe me a favour, Sergeant Major."</p>

The restaurant was relatively empty, located on a corner in one of the less well-off sections of the city in the far outskirts. It was reminiscent of an old diner, with a striped red awning over the front entrance. Outside, a light rain had developed, the roads glistening and puddles forming. A vehicle would drive by every now and then, its tires kicking up plumes of water. Evening had fallen over Sydney, its streetlights casting dry white glows upon the sidewalks and roads.

The restaurant's interior was warm, full of mostly empty chairs and tables. Straws and wrappers littered the floor, though one of the workers here had started sweeping up much of the mess. Music blared at a low volume from a set of speakers in the ceiling and two vid-screens showed off a succession of images from news reports. Both

had their volumes muted, with only the pictures to judge what was happening. So far it had been nothing but news, showing scenes of the devastation at the UNSC facility in Sydney harbour. Bodies were being carried out on stretchers, with those that were deceased being covered with black tarpaulins. A few familiar faces would flash up onto the screens now and again: Kal'Shayar, Leon, Valerie and Elise. Major Jerashar, the Sangheili who had been in charge of the alien contingent on the team, was showed being escorted into the back of a law enforcement van by several armed and armoured soldiers. He looked relatively calm, though the bruising on his face and purple blood trickling down one mandible indicated that he had been beaten for his trouble.

Sergeant Major Charles Okama, now retired, sat across a table from Valerie. Okama had close-cropped greying hair, his expression stern but affable. He was dressed in grey cargo pants and a brown jacket, a cigar of his had been left smoking in an ashtray on the table. Valerie had changed out of her uniform earlier, putting on a fairly standard set of civilian clothes: loose-fitting grey pants, sneakers and a white shirt and dark brown jacket over it. About an hour after her escape from the UNSC facility, she and the others had been taken outside of the city by Elise (who had flown their Pelican). They had then scuttled the Pelican and taken refuge in an abandoned church before Valerie had decided on contacting her old friend. He had been living comfortably in Darwin before he received Valerie's call and had caught the earliest flight down to Sydney. By the time he had arrived, far stricter travel laws had been put in effect. Caine assured the public that such measures would be 'temporary', but this was unlikely. The man had manipulated everyone on the team into carrying out his scheme to remove the Security Council and he had all but succeeded in doing so. It was likely he would manipulate the planet's governments into introducing stricter laws, turning the entire planet into a police state.

"I saw what happened, on the news," Okama said, his tone sympathetic. "Quite the cluster-fuck."

"Do you believe me?" Valerie had spent several minutes explaining to the former Sergeant Major that she was innocent and certainly not a terrorist.

"Of course I do," Okama replied in a very blunt manner. "I doubt I'm the only one who sees the problems with the official story. And I know you, Sergeant. You would never do something this despicable."

Valerie nodded in acknowledgement, feeling relieved. She looked around the restaurant, making sure that no one was eavesdropping. There were about five other people scattered about the diner, with another two at the kitchen behind the counter. None seemed interested in Valerie and Okama, with all of them a good distance away. Valerie only hoped none of them saw her and cared enough to call the authorities, although they may have been oblivious to the news reports flashing on the vid-screens, the ones that would occasionally flash her image onto the screen.

"I never trusted Caine," Okama added.

"You knew him?"

"Yeah." Okama took his cigar from the ashtray before putting it to his mouth and taking a lengthy drag on it. While blowing smoke, he eyed Valerie, his face as serious as it so often was. "The guy was always going on about how someone like him wasn't suited for peacetime work. It almost sounded as if he preferred war."

>"And now he's going to get one, if he keeps up the propaganda," Valerie replied.<p>

"Maybe." Okama did not sound convinced. "So far, he's just been talking about it. As for the 'evidence' he says he has, he's yet to show us any."

"He's probably fabricated it."

Okama nodded in the affirmative manner as he put his cigar back into the ashtray, letting it sit for a while.

"So, you said he put you in this team," Okama said after a pause whilst he raised one eyebrow slightly. "And now that you think about it, your connection to this 'Lev'Kanar' character makes sense. If he was working directly with this alien, then it's likely that Lev'Kanar suggested to the General that you be put in the team. Same for Leon and Kal'Shayar."

"He put us together just so he could fuck with us," Elise said, still in some disbelief over it. It almost boggled the mind just how elaborate the whole thing had been. Caine wanted a sure-fire way to start a war while Lev'Kanar had wanted revenge. Caine was going to get his way soon enough but Lev'Kanar was still waiting for that vengeance. She wondered if the pair would get along now, as Caine no longer needed the Skirmisher from what she knew. He might attempt to have him killed.

"And what is the favour you need, Sergeant?" Okama asked, having taken in everything he had been told with careful and quiet deliberation. Valerie had thought that she might have had a tough time convincing him of the truth but apparently Okama was far more open-minded than she had originally thought.

"I need your clearance," Valerie said. "Your connections. We need to get in touch with the Sangheili who was arrested. You still have ties to the military and right now you're the only person I can think of who won't sell us out at the first opportunity."

"Hmm..." Okama pondered the request for a moment, leaning back in his chair while Valerie watched him expectantly. "I might be able to get you into the compound, but any further than that..." He shook his head. "Honestly, I don't think I'd be able to even do that. I'm retired. I suppose I could get myself out of retirement as a response to the 'attack', but I seriously doubt I could get you to that Elite. What was his name again?"

"Jerashar."

"That's it." Okama nodded. Elise had no one else she could turn to, save for Leon, Elise and Kal'Shayar. The four of them were all in this together, but unfortunately they were also the four people wanted by the authorities. Okama had ties to some higher-ups that he may be able to exploit, even if he was retired. Valerie disliked asking him to do this sort of thing, as she had always respected the

man and was somewhat adverse to asking for favours. She had always preferred to look after herself.

"Look, I'll drop in some time tomorrow," Okama said. "I know where the old church is." He still had a doubting expression on his face, as if thinking that this whole plan was doomed to failure. Valerie felt the same way, to a degree, but she had no other options. If she wanted to clear her name, as well as do the same thing for Leon, Elise and Kal'Shayar then she would need to get to Jerashar and help him escape. He would be able to call on Rel Valum, his superior and with this support from the Sangheili they may be able to bring down Caine. Right now, the General had the entire UNSC on his side. Leon had suggested simply breaking into the compound in order to get to Caine and kill him but even Valerie thought that would be a suicide mission.

Jerashar had been taken to a secure compound outside of the city in a bushland region. Caine's whereabouts were currently unknown, but it was likely he was at the same compound. The facility in Sydney Harbour had been made off-limits since the attack and there was no reason for Caine to reside in his new position of power in that place. He would secure himself and his collaborators, as he would be well aware of Leon and the others planning to make a move against him. There was also Lev'Kanar and his followers to worry about, as it was likely they would be with the General and probably plotting a betrayal.

"I'll tell you then what I've decided," Okama said. "What I've planned. I just need some time to think about how we're going to do this."

"So you're on board with it?"

"Damn right I am," he said. "I believe what you've told me, Sergeant. That means Caine is threatening to start another war, one that we sure as hell don't need. I get the feeling that the Elites and Jackals don't really want one either. The fact that you're wanted by the authorities tells me enough."

Valerie nodded. She was relieved, as there had been some doubt in her mind that Okama might not want to be part of this. It might have been only a remote possibility, but it had bugged her nonetheless. Now all she had to do was wait until Okama came to her with a plan. There was still a chance that the whole thing would fail, but it was certainly worth a try. She could not just hide in a hole somewhere and hope the whole thing blew over. Caine would have everyone available to him searching for her and the others. They would have to leave UNSC-controlled space in order to catch a break and even then they would still be hunted. They knew the truth behind what had happened and were thus threats to Caine. He knew this, as did they. He would not rest until they had been taken care of.

"It was nice talking to you, Sergeant," Okama said, rising out of his seat. "I should get going. I'll call you tomorrow about what we're gonna do."

"Goodbye." Valerie watched as he walked away, exiting the restaurant through its front door and disappearing from view around a corner. She was left alone at the table, a plate of half-eaten steak in front of her. She decided against staying any longer than she needed to and

so stood up, paying for the food she had bought before leaving the restaurant.

The outside air was cold and the rain had started to fall a bit heavier. Valerie started towards the parking lot, catching sight of Okama's car as he drove away. Valerie had acquired a rental car for herself which sat at the end of the parking lot. As she walked towards it, she became aware of the feeling that someone may be watching her. There were a few dumpsters by the side of the restaurant here and plenty of refuse littered the ground. She hurried towards the vehicle and pulled the keys out of her jacket as she closed the distance to it, feeling annoyed at herself for having that irrational feeling of being observed. Opening the driver's side door, she climbed in, the car's systems coming to life automatically when they detected her presence. The door closed beside her as she went to program the computer inside to take her out of town, only for a shuffling sound behind her to get her attention. She felt a hand grab her head from behind, holding her against the headrest while the cold steel of a blade was pressed against her neck.

"Valerie Nevas," a familiar voice said, satisfaction lacing its tone. "I have been keeping track of you."

Lev'Kanar had somehow put himself in the backseat. Valerie saw him in the rear-view mirror, his yellow eyes piercing into her own.

"How...?" She was interrupted when he tightened his grip on her, the blade cutting into her skin and drawing a slight trickle of blood from her neck. He was careful not to slice into her jugular, making it clear that he wanted her alive.

"Questions come later," Lev'Kanar said, leaning forwards and putting his head by her own. Valerie could feel his warm breath at her neck, the tip of his snout brushing against her hair. "I am certain you will not give up the locations of your friends, but that is no matter."

He let go of her head but kept the blade pressed against her neck. Using his free-hand, he reached towards the on-board computer and keyed in a set of coordinates. The computer calculated the most direct route before activating the engines, achieving all this within a few seconds.

"The two of us will go on a drive." Lev'Kanar put his free arm around her chest, pinning both of her arms against the chair. "While the General wishes for you killed, I have other plans. You will watch every last one of your friends perish and then you will have felt perhaps some of the pain I have."

She knew what he was referring to, how she had killed his family. It was clear now that Lev'Kanar did not have the same goals as General Caine. Whereas Caine would have preferred her and the others eliminated for the threat they posed, Lev'Kanar very much wanted to toy with them. There was something very wrong with this young Skirmisher's mind.

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><p>Some distance outside of the city, where the buildings thinned

out and vegetation thickened was a fairly old church with boarded up doors and windows. The rear entrance had had the boards nailed across it pulled down, allowing access into the ageing structure. Surrounding it were a few other abandoned buildings as well as a gravel road that wound its way past a rust-filled scrap-yard and towards a main highway that went on towards the city. It was a fairly quiet region, with the monolithic structures of the city of Sydney visible on the horizon.<p>

Night had fallen and Leon had found himself sitting watch within the church's mass area. The wooden pews were covered with dust and some were falling apart, cracked and splintering in places. Pigeons were nesting up in the rafters and occasionally a few of their droppings were plop down onto the floor, further adding to the stretches of white marks that covered much of what was below them. The altar was the main source of light here, old candles there having been lit up which in turn cast a fluctuating yellow glow across much of the church's interior. Leon sat in a chair by the altar, watching the front entrance. He had set up a simple tripwire at the rear entrance for added security, one that would trigger a bell when tripped. He had found that bell in one of the store rooms here, along with other basic comforts such as blankets and pillows. The church had belonged to a more old-fashioned religion, as a wooden cross had been hung up on the wall over the altar. It was definitely some form of Christianity, though there was nothing left here to specify which particular kind.

Leon had his shotgun in his lap, the safety switched to 'on' while he rocked in the chair steadily. The air was musty and the floor ahead was covered with years-old pieces of pigeon faeces and general refuse. There was a pile of holy Bibles sitting on a trolley by one wall, partially covered with a dusty old cloth. Just about everything here was covered with dust and smelt like pigeon shit. Leon did not like this place but he put up with it anyway as it made a fairly decent refuge for him and the rest of the little group he had found himself a part of. Caine had labelled them as fugitives. To think that the Spartan had trusted the General only made his sudden betrayal all the more frustrating. Then there was Serena, who seemed to be working with the General as well. It boggled his mind to think that they had been part of some kind of conspiracy.

Exhaustion was catching up to him, causing him to doze off. He woke himself up before he could properly fall into sleep. He kept himself awake with thoughts of getting back at Caine and Lev'Kanar, throttling them to death with his bare hands. Then there was the fact that Valerie had left to try and get help. Leon had insisted on coming along but she had been more insistent on going alone. She believed it was better that way, for if she got caught then there were still three of them who would be in a position to fight Caine. It was unlikely that the General had gotten the support of everyone he was now in charge of but only a select few knew what had really happened. The attack had been engineered by him and his supporters, among them Lev'Kanar. However, Leon could not shake the feeling that there was something more to it than just the ambitions of a power hungry General.

If Valerie did not return soon then it was likely she had been captured, or worse. This only helped to keep Leon awake as he remained in his seat, awaiting her return. He also awaited the potential raid by the authorities but it was doubtful they knew where

he and the others were. If Valerie was caught she would not easily divulge the whereabouts of the rest of her group.

As for Caine's betrayal, the evidence of something being off about him had been all there. Leon told himself he should have known something was wrong when it was clear that Caine had been withholding information. Their connections to Lev'Kanar should have raised suspicions but Leon had not given these things much thought until it had been too late. Now he was here, stuck in some old building with the people he had once worked for now trying to find and arrest him. He had been brought up to be loyal to the UNSC but he should have known better than to think that the organization was free of corrupt individuals.

So he sat and he watched. He waited for Valerie's arrival, but it never came. And then he did fall asleep, the exhaustion he felt from the day's events finally getting the better of him.

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><p>On the second floor of the church in a room that had once served as a place where the priest could work and rest, both Kal'Shayar and Elise had settled with the Skirmisher seated on the side of the old bed. They had changed the sheets and dusted off the mattress as the whole thing had been covered with the stuff, the slightest movement upon it sending a cloud of it pluming forth.</p>

Elise had a first aid kit open in front of her as she applied a healing gel to Kal'Shayar's shoulder wound. The Skirmisher sat still, barely making a sound. He had removed the upper parts of his armour and the under-suit underneath, allowing Elise to get to the wounds and dress them properly. The pair was silent, the only source of illumination coming from a single portable light on a desk in the corner. That light had been there when they had come in and surprisingly enough the batteries had still been functioning. As for noise, there was none save for the occasional chirrup of a cricket from outside.

It had been a long day for the both of them. Kal'Shayar still felt somewhat weak but he could rest easy in the fact that he was no longer bleeding. His head ached, his 'black' eye throbbing painfully. He felt little surprise towards General Caine's betrayal and had gotten the feeling early on that all was not right with the General. Now he only had himself to blame for not acting on this feeling earlier, because now he and the humans he had come to consider his friends were in some very serious trouble. He could not rest easy until he was off of this planet but he knew his son was still here. As much as he had accepted how much of a threat his son had become towards galactic peace, he still wished to try and talk to him and hopefully convince him to denounce his criminal ways. It was unlikely this would work, but it was worth a try. Lev'Kanar did seem to be too consumed with his desire for revenge, both against his father and Valerie. Trying to reason with him seemed like a foolish endeavour.

At least Kal'Shayar found some comfort in Elise. She had rubbed the stinging gel into his wound and was just finishing on the exit wound, each application sending a twinge of pain down his arm but otherwise it was nothing he could not handle. Kal'Shayar could think of little to talk about and could tell that Elise was still somewhat shocked

with all that had happened today. Nonetheless, she cared enough about him to try and heal his injuries. It was something he greatly appreciated.

There was a window at one wall but it was boarded up, leaving only a few narrow slits to see through. None provided any illumination because of the levels of darkness outside. Kal'Shayar felt Elise take her hand off of his back, stowing the gel and closing the first aid kit. She stood up and moved around the bed, sitting down in the chair by the desk at the wall ahead.

"I've done what I can," she said as she placed the first aid kit upon the desk. "The bleeding stopped a while ago but the healing gel should help with the...well...healing\_."

Kal'Shayar nodded in response. There was a silence between the two of them, as Elise slowly leaned back into her chair.

"You can have the bed," she said. "You need it."

"I am fine." Kal'Shayar had gotten accustomed to human beds from his time on board the Vanguard. They were not uncomfortable (far from it) but they were not what he was used to. Kig-Yar "nests" were often constructed out of purely natural materials but human beds were very artificial in comparison, but certainly still comfortable, to an extent. If their situation was not so dire, he might have been able to enjoy his time on Earth. As it stood now, he was hard-pressed to find anything enjoyable about it. His first day here had resulted in him being shot at and betrayed. He had even been shot at by his own son. There was only so much a man could take and even a Skirmisher warrior such as him could grow tired of such 'excitement'.

He watched Elise as she turned to the desk in front of her. She opened one of the drawers, sifting through the data-pads and trinkets within. She pulled out a metal necklace, one that had a small cross hanging from it. Elise returned her gaze towards him, smiling.

"Do you follow a religion?" Elise asked.

"Not necessarily," Kal'Shayar answered. "There was the Covenant religion that many of my people followed. I, personally, did not believe in it. I kept this to myself, of course, as it would have been considered 'heresy' if any of my superiors had known. Before the Covenant took in my species, there were a number of different religions, most of them based on legends of ancestral warriors and their exploits. Most clans had their own warrior gods but the Covenant was quick to stamp these pagan religions out."

Elise listened carefully, clearly fascinated.

"Humans used to have something similar," she said. "Things changed over time. I've never been a big believer myself, but sometimes I think that there has to be some kind of higher power somewhere. There are too many things in this universe that can't be explained. Science can only explain so much." She paused, looking him in the eyes. "Do you believe in fate?"

"Not really." Kal'Shayar shook his head. "Things happen, sometimes through what you humans would call 'luck'. Fate is not something I give much thought to."

"What do you think of what's happened? Is that 'luck'?"

"Maybe." Kal'Shayar did not know what else to say about this. Luck or not, their situation was far from good.

Elise stood up and stepped towards him, one hand going to the plume of thick feathers at his head. She ran her hand through them, taking in the texture with considerable fascination. Kal'Shayar gave her an inquiring look but he found that he did not mind. Rather, he enjoyed the attention. She smiled at him, taking her hand away from him. It was a somewhat nervous smile, one that Kal'Shayar returned.

"I was wondering what they felt like," she said, half-jokingly.

"Are they what you expected?"

"Pretty much."

There was a silence between the two. Kal'Shayar stood up, aware that Elise looked anxious. He could gather this much from the subtle changes in her scent. He put a hand to her shoulder before running it up her neck and to her cheek. He had confessed to her back on board the Vanguard that he felt something for her, though even he was uncertain of the nature of these feelings.

Elise leaned into his touch but looked sheepish while doing so.

"I was thinking about what you said, before we left the Vanguard," she said as Kal'Shayar rested his hand on her shoulder. "As weird as this is, I feel like it's the right thing. I mean...I never thought I'd feel this way about an alien."

"Feel in what way?" Kal'Shayar was genuinely curious. He closed the distance between them, standing a few inches taller than her and more muscular. She was perhaps the only friend he had left, as not even Leon and Valerie were quite 'friends', in his view. He did not dislike them, but he did not talk with them much.

"I don't know how to explain it," she replied.

"Neither do I." Kal'Shayar gave his species' version of a smile, partially revealing his sharp teeth. This did not seem to faze her whatsoever and she instead put a hand to his chest, trailing her fingers along the muscle there.

"We might not get another chance," Elise said. She looked up at him, their eyes meeting. "What's happened today got me thinking. About things I'd like to do before I die. Even if we somehow get through this, we could end up going our separate ways. We're from entirely different planets after all."

"And what would you like to do before you die?" Kal'Shayar asked. He had sometimes thought about this himself, but when his daughter had died he had more or less forgotten all about it. Instead, he had become quite fine with the idea of dying. Now he found himself worrying over Elise. Once a man with nothing to lose, he had found himself terrified of losing her. They had known each other only for a few weeks, but having survived the events today had certainly put things into perspective. Their time in the land of the living was

short and it was perhaps best to try and make the most of it.

"I'm not sure." Elise smiled but looked nervous nonetheless, briefly biting her bottom lip. "I mean...Can this even work?"

Kal'Shayar nodded in response. From what he knew about human anatomy, he and Elise would be compatible enough.

"We will find a way to make it work." Giving in to his feelings, he put a hand to her chest, pulling the zipper on her uniform. He pushed it open and Elise let it fall off her arms and onto the floor. She had an odd looking undergarment over the mounds on her chest, but Kal'Shayar elected to take his time, running his hands over the bare skin around it. It was warm and smooth to the touch, having a certain appeal to Kal'Shayar. Kig-Yar females had similar skin but they also had rougher patches on their backs. He knew that he would have to be careful with her, but this was something he was more than willing to do.

He could see that Elise still appeared nervous. Putting his hands to her shoulders, he looked her in the eyes. Even he could feel some anxiety, his heart pounding in his chest as he spoke to her.

"Relax, Elise," he said in a reassuring tone. "We have the entire night to ourselves." There was the chance that they might be discovered, but it was not something that concerned him. He leaned his head forwards and she kissed him.

## 21. Preparations

\*\*Preparations\*\*

February 14th, 2558

Streaks of sunlight were working their way through the gaps between the boards at the window, shooting across the room like blades. One stream fell upon Elise's eyes, causing her to shuffle where she lay, her eyes gradually opening and adjusting to the dim light within the room. She was lying on her side, aware of another body next to her. It took her a moment to remember where she was and the circumstances leading to it, as well as the slight feeling of incredulity that was now buzzing about her head.

It was not something she had expected, but it had been rather pleasant. She wondered what others would think if they ever found out, but she had never been one to worry too much about what other people had thought of her. The fact that she had spent the night having sex with an alien did not bother her too much. If it had, she would never have allowed it to happen. To her, it was a welcome diversion from all that had happened in the past forty-eight hours. If she was going to die, a very likely possibility given the circumstances, then she would try to make the most of her time left in the land of the living. Not that she had any plans on getting killed, but the fact that death was something very possible for her right now had given her an altered outlook on life. She would seize what opportunities she could when it came to doing things she might not normally consider.

The sheets covering her were thin, keeping her exposed to the cold

air within the room. She was naked, which was not surprising, and parts of her ached dullly. It was not unexpected, given what she had gone through the night before. Kal'Shayar had been very thorough and, though he had assured her he would be gentle, she could not fault him for getting caught up in the heat of the moment. He lay on his side, his back to Elise, snoozing quietly. She put a hand to his back, trailing her fingers along the leathery blue-black skin. He had a lot of flexible and well-toned muscle, a result of years of combat training. The plumes of dark feathers on his head and down his arms were soft and Elise put a hand to those upon his head, brushing through them with her fingers. Kal'Shayar remained asleep. He squirmed a little under her touch and emitted a low grunt before settling down again.

Elise lay on her back, the bed-sheets up to her chest. She mused over what had occurred. It had been a few years since she had last been intimate with anybody. Kal'Shayar had certainly made the latest experience count. She recalled it all very vividly and smiled to herself. Considering what they had done, it was no surprise that the region between her legs was a little sore. Despite their physical differences, things had worked out well enough. Elise had been worried that the whole night would be awkward and a disaster best left forgotten. The fact it had gone on without a hitch was definitely welcomed.

What had she seen in the Skirmisher? It went beyond his exotic appearance and skills in the bedroom. There was something more to it, a feeling that Elise had had since she had first met him. There was a definite connection between them, one even stronger now that they had become intimate. Kal'Shayar carried an air of what Elise would almost describe as 'nobility', one that made him act almost gentlemanly towards her. She got the impression that he cared for her and would become very protective of her as a result of what had occurred.

She traced lazy circles along his back as she thought things over, trying to visualize what the future of this relationship might hold. If they somehow survived all of this, somehow stopped Caine and Lev'Kanar, she could see Kal'Shayar leaving to return home. She wondered if she would follow or even be allowed to follow. She did not fancy the prospect of being the only human on a Kig-Yar dominated world. Maybe Kal'Shayar would stay with her, since he had nothing left at home. His previous mate and his daughter were both dead and his son was one of the people responsible for the situation they were in now. In a way, Lev'Kanar had brought the two of them together.

She became aware of some stinging sensations at her back. Kal'Shayar had been gentle, mostly, but his clawed fingers had put a few minor scratches on her. It was nothing she could not handle but she figured that Kal'Shayar would be distressed about it. He would not have wanted to hurt her in any way. She remembered from the night before, of what he had said when they had finally collapsed into the bed from exhaustion: "No matter what happens, I will protect you."

She had not thought much of it then, thinking it a spur of the moment sort of statement, but thinking about it now lead her to believe that maybe the Skirmisher was very much serious. He did not seem like the type who would say something like that lightly.

Kal'Shayar rolled over at that moment, facing Elise. His yellow eyes

were open and he had what looked like a smile on his face, though it was a bit hard to tell with his species. He put a hand to her shoulder before working it up her neck, allowing him to caress her cheek.

"Did you sleep well?" He asked.

Elise nodded in response. She had caught some much needed rest after yesterday's events, but that did not make her dread today any less. They had a lot of people looking for them, intent on arresting and even killing them. Caine was still out there, formulating his schemes. She knew that she had been used by him, given the role of scapegoat along with Kal'Shayar, Leon and Valerie. While Caine used his newfound authority to build up for a war, he ensured that those who knew the truth were hunted.

"Given the circumstances, I slept as well as I could," she said.

Kal'Shayar nodded in understanding before rolling onto his back, pressing the thick plume of feathers on his head against the pillow. Elise leaned over and planted a light kiss on the tip of his snout, getting a noticeable grin from the Skirmisher.

"I take it you enjoyed yourself?" He asked. It was perhaps the first time she had seen him actually happy since they had met. She had clearly had a very positive effect on him, as much as he had on her.

"You could say that," Elise said, hovering over him slightly, running her hands along his muscular chest. She had a lot of questions, most of them relating to their relationship. Still, she did not really want to spoil the mood with any really serious matters.

"I thought I would never find someone else, after my mate died," Kal'Shayar mused, his eyes looking up into hers. He put an arm around her protectively, trailing it down her back. "It appears that I was wrong."

Elise smiled at him, though she felt some uncertainty judging from the way he was looking at her. The look in his eyes told of very strong emotions, that Kal'Shayar genuinely felt for her. Was it love? It probably was, but thinking about this just made Elise doubt her position even more. Could she really reciprocate those feelings completely? They were both so different, yet there was clearly some deeper connection between them.

"I want to ask you," Elise said, their eyes locking. "Just how serious is this? To you?"

Kal'Shayar looked surprised by the question. His eyes darted about briefly as he mulled it over before returning his gaze towards her own.

"We are mated now, Elise." He said this very matter-of-factly, as if surprised that Elise did not know about it. "That is about as serious as it can get. Is it not the same for you humans?"

Elise shook her head.

"Not quite." She was not sure what else to add. She had no problem with him, it was what she felt that was troubling her. "Be honest with me, Kal. Do you love me?"

Kal'Shayar did not hesitate to respond.

"Yes." He put his hands to her sides, rubbing them along her slender form. "Why do you ask?"

"I'm not sure," Elise replied. "The future worries me, Kal. I don't think this will last."

Kal'Shayar seemed surprised, sitting up and allowing Elise to do the same. She moved off of him, kneeling by him as he regarded her with a discerning gaze. He seemed quite interested in her hair, putting a hand past her cheek before running his fingers through the light brown strands. She normally wore it tied back, but there had been no reason to keep it that way last night. Kal'Shayar still had the bandages on over his shoulder wound and the bruising around his left eye was still fairly prominent, but he looked an awful lot better than he had yesterday.

"You are wondering what we will do, when this situation with Caine and my son is over?" Kal'Shayar was as intuitive as ever. It was probably part of the reason why he was such an excellent fighter and judge of character.

"Yeah." Elise watched him as his expression became more thoughtful. He was considering the possibilities very carefully from what she could tell. He sat back against the headboard, returning his gaze towards her as he finally spoke again.

"I am now sure what I wish to do when this situation is over," he said. "I know that if we are to survive and expose the truth about Caine's actions, we may need to kill my son. However, the odds are sorely stacked against us. If we do survive, then I think I may wish to stay with you. There is nothing for me back home, on Sauem. That part of my life ended when my daughter died." He paused for a moment, letting the words sink in. Elise was surprised to hear this but it only reinforced just how seriously Kal'Shayar took their relationship.

"I will do whatever I can to protect you, Elise." It was clear from his voice that he was serious about this. They had not known each other for very long but it seemed that the Skirmisher was already acting as if they were a properly mated couple.

"When I agreed to become part of this team, I thought I might end up in a position to make a difference again for the good of the galaxy," he continued. "Then Caine betrayed us and I realized that I had merely been used, as had you and the others. Now, with you, I see a reason to finish this fight. I can honestly say that I will do whatever it takes to bring Caine to justice, as well as my son. If succeeding in this will ensure the opportunity to live a proper life with you then it is even more of a reason to see this through. I love you, Elise. However, I will understand if you do not feel the same way. We are different, not only physically but culturally as well."

>Elise was speechless as Kal'Shayar finished this confession. No one had said this sort of thing to her, certainly not seriously. It was

strange, when she thought about it: no human man could be this serious about a relationship with her and when she had just about given up on finding the sort of man she wanted, an alien comes along and swears that he will protect her. It was almost surreal, but Kal'Shayar was not one to lie. Whatever he said, he was serious about it. He still had a sense of humour, but he had not been joking with what he had just told Elise.<p>

"If you do not see this as seriously as I do, I can accept that," Kal'Shayar said. He leaned towards her, bringing his face closer to hers. "Know that I will love you regardless."

Elise knew that there were many things that might change if she committed to him, though she was prepared to accept these aspects. If they somehow survived the fight against Caine and wound up together without the threat of being killed, they would have to learn to live with each other. A single night together was one thing, actually living with each other was different altogether. He could not give her children (at least, she thought so) and others would look at their union as if it were a crime against nature. Heck, it probably was, as Elise thought about it some more. Oddly enough, she was not too concerned about this.

After some deliberation, Elise leaned forwards, putting a hand to the back of his head before using it to pull him close.

"It's serious," she said simply. Seconds later, she was kissing him, feeling his tongue against hers as he fell back against the headboard. He abruptly broke from the kiss, running his long bluish tongue down the side of her neck, his warm breath brushing along her skin. It made her own breath catch in her throat.

He had his arms around her now and clutched her tightly. Their eyes meeting for a moment, Kal'Shayar proceeded to move one hand down to her waist. Elise could feel his need for her pressing against the inside of her thigh. She shifted slightly, preparing to guide him into her.

Unfortunately, the whole exchange was interrupted by a very loud knock on the door. The two of them came apart immediately, with Elise rolling off of him and covering herself with the sheets. Kal'Shayar looked understandably annoyed but stood up, his expression turning to his species' equivalent of a frown as he climbed out of the bed and moved to the door. The fact that he was naked did not seem to concern him, though he pulled the door open only partially. Peering his head around, his gaze fell upon Leon, who stood in the corridor outside wearing a serious expression.

"Lieutenant," Kal'Shayar said, ensuring only his head and shoulders were visible around the partially open door. "What is it?"

"You and the Commander need to get ready to leave," Leon said. He did not seem too concerned as to why the two of them would have spent the whole night together in the one room. Elise remained sitting in the bed, listening to the exchange whilst being out of Leon's sight. It was embarrassing, to say the least, but she doubted Leon would be bothered by the two of them being together like this.

"And the Sergeant?" Kal'Shayar asked, curious.

"That's the problem. Sergeant Nevas did not return last night. We need to assume she's been captured and prepare to move. I doubt she'd tell them where we are, but they could torture her for the information." Leon said this with noticeable disgust. "That's why we need to leave."

"We will get on it right away," Kal'Shayar said. He was about to close the door but Leon put his hand against it, keeping it open.

"It may not be any of my business, but I don't want this newly started romance getting in the way of what we have to do. Is that understood?"

Kal'Shayar nodded. Leon stepped back away from the door and turned to leave, allowing the Skirmisher to close it. He turned around, returning his gaze to Elise who had a smirk on her face.

"He didn't specify how long we should be," Elise said. Kal'Shayar nodded, knowing exactly what she was implying. He climbed back into the bed with her and the pair proceeded to pick up where they had left off.

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><p>Upon re-entering the church's main congregation area, Leon heard the rumble of a truck's engine from outside. It was enough of a reason for him to switch the safety off on his shotgun while he hurried towards one of the boarded-up windows at the front of the church. He watched through a gap in the wooden planks as a large grey and black truck came to a halt just outside. A man in a military uniform with short greying hair and a pistol in a holster at his waist climbed out of the truck's driver's cabin. Surprisingly, no one else emerged as Leon had been expecting a full squad of Marines to barge inside in an attempt to apprehend him.</p>

Instead, the man with the greying hair approached the front door. Leon watched as he regarded the front of the rundown church with a curious gaze before stepping closer to it and knocking. He did it rather loudly, with each thump echoing throughout the main hall. Leon was unsure what he should do, as it was clear that this man was not here to arrest him. It might have been a clever trap, one intended to lure him out, but he somehow doubted this. It was not the way the authorities would work. Rather, they would have simply surrounded the place and launched canisters of tear gas inside before crashing through the windows with their weapons at the ready.

The man knocked again. He then took a step back from the door, his gaze going towards the wooden boards that Leon was peering through. He made his way over, peering towards the very same gap that Leon was watching him through. It was almost as if he knew the Spartan was there, though this was unlikely and Leon assumed it was just coincidence.

"Hello?" The man attempted to get a clearer look of what lay within, squinting into the darkness behind the window. "I know there's someone there. I can hear you breathing."

Leon paused, put off a little by this comment. He had not thought that he had been breathing that loudly.

"I'm a friend of Valerie's. Is she in there?"

Leon realized then who it was. Valerie had told him before she had left last night that she was going to meet an old friend of hers, Sergeant Major Charles Okama. This was clearly him, though he apparently did not know that Valerie had not returned from that meeting. Could he have been involved in her capture? It seemed unlikely, but Leon was cautious nonetheless. He broke his silence at that point.

"Come around to the back," he said. Okama was not at all surprised when he heard the voice. He just nodded and started walking around the church.

Leon went to the back entrance while keeping his shotgun gripped in one hand. The back entrance was the one he and the others had used to gain access to the church. They had taken the boards down and busted the lock on the old metal door, with only a wooden table moved against it in order to keep it from swinging open. Leon pushed this table aside and pulled the door open, stepping outside into the cold morning air as he watched Okama approach from the right. The Sergeant Major stopped just in front of him, holding out a hand in greeting that Leon took and shook.

"You must be the Spartan that Valerie mentioned," Okama said. He looked past Leon, his gaze going down the carpeted hallway behind him. "Can I come in?"

>Leon nodded, stepping aside and allowing Okama to walk by. Once he was inside the Spartan closed the door, pushing the table back into place in front of it.<p>

Okama had made his way out into the main hall, looking around the dusty old church with an almost impressed expression on his face. He approached the altar, putting a finger to the dusty bench there, drawing a line through the dust before rubbing it off on his shirt.

"This must have been a nice place once," he said as he turned around to face Leon, watching as the Spartan entered the hall. "Is Valerie here? She would have told you to expect me."

"You just answered your own question," Leon said. The fact that Valerie had been captured still angered him, a feeling that was greatly exacerbated by the fact that he was in no real position to search for her. There were no leads for him to go on, other than the fact that Caine had apparently retreated to some secure compound outside of Sydney and that Valerie may have been taken there. He could not be sure that she was even there, but it seemed the most likely.

"Valerie didn't come back last night," Leon continued. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

Okama shook his head.

"Not at all. I told Valerie I'd drop by with a plan. She told me all about Caine and what he did, as well as how that alien, Lev'Canner or something..."

"\_Lev'Kanar\_," Leon interrupted, correcting him.

"Right. \_Lev'Kanar\_ helped this General to take out most of the UNSC Security Council. Now Caine's given himself all sorts of executive powers. It's a bit of a bummer, really."

"That's quite the understatement."

There was a pause. Okama gave another visual survey of his surroundings before returning his gaze to Leon.

"Is it just you here?" He asked.

Leon shook his head. He had told Kal'Shayar and Elise to hurry up but it was clear they were in no hurry. What they did with each other was of no concern to him, regardless of how unlikely their relationship was. However, the fact that it might get in the way of other things was what concerned him. He could not really comment on it though, since he and Valerie had been similarly engaged during recent days.

"No. There are two others..."

"Valerie told me. Elise McGillon and Kal'Shayar."

As if on cue, those two emerged from a door nearby. Both were fully dressed, with Elise in the process of tying her hair back. Okama turned to face them, not at all bothered by the presence of a Skirmisher. In fact, he seemed quite fascinated.

"I haven't seen one of you for a while," he commented. Kal'Shayar stopped a few metres away and frowned at the ageing Sergeant Major, but otherwise he said nothing.

"Who are you?" Elise asked.

"Sergeant Major Charles Okama, retired. At least, I was until recently." He stepped over to Elise and shook hands with her before holding out a hand to Kal'Shayar. He eyed it suspiciously for a moment but took it in his own anyway, proceeding to shake hands with the human.

"Shame about Valerie," Okama mused, turning around to face Leon again.

"Have you got a plan?" Leon asked. He did not have too much confidence in this old soldier, but Valerie had clearly trusted him so he supposed there was no reason why he should not.

"A plan?" Okama paused as he gave this some thought. "In a way, I do. I could get in a lot of trouble if they find out I'm helping you, since the three of you are apparently 'terrorists', but if what Valerie told me is true then there is a lot more at stake. Caine's already started trying to build-up some kind of anti-alien sentiment. He plans to start another war and we can't allow that to happen."

"We need to get into that compound and rescue the Sangheili being held captive there." Leon had only thought this far ahead. As for what they would do when they actually freed Jerashar, he had no idea.

He figured that Jerashar would have some idea how to remedy the situation. If they could take out Caine while they were there, then all the better.

"Lucky for you guys, I have some friends in high places," Okama said. "I managed to pull a few strings and call in a few favours. Normally I wouldn't do this sort of thing, but I trust Valerie's word and I can already see for myself what Caine intends on doing. The man has to be stopped."

"So you will help us?" Kal'Shayar asked, sounding surprised. Okama had come at a good time, considering their situation. There was nowhere for the three of them to go. They would be fugitives in all UNSC-controlled space until they somehow managed to clear their names.

"No reason for me not to. I've already got a few other friends of mine who can see what Caine intends to do, but they're working their own little operations. As for what I worked out, it's a risky but workable plan."

"How risky?" Leon could see that Okama was not completely faithful in whatever plan he had developed. This much was clear from the uncertain look that had crossed his face when he had spoken.

"I got a hold of the authorization documents we need to gain access to the compound," Okama explained. "However, they're good for only two people. That means two of you are going to need to hide in the back of my truck, preferably inside a metal container."

"You're joking," Elise said, frowning. She already knew which two would be the ones being packed away like sardines. Kal'Shayar certainly could not get by on regular authorization, being an alien and all.

"How'd you get them?" Leon asked.

"An old friend of mine has some friends in ONI. He owed me a favour and they owed him favours. It's amazing what you can get when you know the right people." Okama smiled, but it was short-lived as he turned his gaze to Elise and Kal'Shayar. "I think you two are going to need to pack yourselves away into the metal boxes I have in the back of my truck."

"Won't they be searched?"

"Not if the contents are supposedly dangerous," Okama replied. "I'm going in under the guise of a delivery of hazardous radioactive materials used in weapons research. The compound is pretty big and all sorts of black projects are worked on over there. This delivery is actually scheduled, it's just that we're going to ensure the real delivery truck doesn't make it there."

"How?" Leon was already sceptical about this plan. It all seemed rather haphazard, regardless of how much Okama had needed to do to get it ready.

"We intercept the truck and knock out the drivers before busting the vehicle's engines. That way we'll have all the time we need to get into the compound. Once inside, you'll just have to keep out of sight

of the surveillance cameras there."

"And that's it?" Elise was the one to say this, sounding unimpressed. "Unbelievable. That plan's going to end in nothing but disaster."

Okama shrugged.

"I didn't need to do all this, you know," he said. "As much as I want Caine gone, what happens to you three isn't really my concern. I could very well just leave you here and let fate decide what to do with you. I'm giving you a chance here and I'm putting my own ass on the line by doing it. At least show some appreciation."

There was a brief silence as they all thought this over. Leon knew they had no other option. The only way they would be able to clear their names would be to get to Caine and he would likely be in this compound. Okama was giving them a chance to get inside and Leon was fairly confident he could improvise once they were in. He had been in similar situations in the past.

"This is the only chance we have," he said, getting everyone's attention.

"I still think it's crazy," Elise countered.

"This whole situation is crazy. We can stay here, maybe move through the countryside in an effort to evade the authorities, but eventually we're going to have to go after Caine. We're fugitives, wanted by just about every type of law enforcement authority on the planet. In their eyes, we're the ones who wiped out the Security Council. The four of us know that isn't true. The only way we're going to prove that to everyone is if we get to Caine, maybe find some kind of evidence that proves our innocence. He's in that compound, we all know this, the only trouble is getting in. Okama here can get us in."

"And when we're in?"

"We wing it. Simple."

Elise still looked unconvinced, something that was understandable. They were about to take a gamble and there was a good chance it would go badly. However, Leon had not gotten as far as he had without taking risks. This venture was probably the riskiest he would ever go on but in his view there was no other option. If they stayed here the authorities would close in. They might have even tortured Valerie in order to get this location. The thought disturbed Leon greatly and made him all the more eager to get after Caine.

"I'm with you guys all the way," Okama said. "Heck, even more so now that Valerie's gone. If they have her, they might find out from her that I'm helping you guys. If so, I'm in as much trouble as you three. All the more reason for me to help out."

Leon nodded in acknowledgement of this. Okama seemed like a capable sort. Judging from the silence that followed, he assumed that everyone was on board with the plan. Even he had his doubts about it but his mind was set on carrying it out. If it went badly, they would have to improvise. Though the last time he had done that, he had

ended up crippled. He could only hope things went a bit better this time around.

## 22. Infiltration

### \*\*Infiltration\*\*

February 14th, 2558

It was nearing midday when the compound came into view, nestled amongst some hills and shrouded by trees and shrubs. The sky above had gone grey, hinting at coming rain and the smell of moisture was thick on the air. The compound was vast, but only a fraction of it was above ground. A tall wire fence went around its perimeter, topped with barbed wire. Guard towers were spaced along its fence in intervals and armed soldiers patrolled throughout. There were several grey and silver buildings, with a few large warehouse-style ones and smaller official buildings in the centre, including a barracks that sat next to a wide-open parade ground. Further into the compound was the entrance to a vast network of tunnels that ran underground, leading to the more restricted areas of the base.

Watching the front of the compound as they approached, Leon felt some uncertainty as he surveyed the guard towers and armed soldiers near the main gate. The compound was one of the most secure in the country with countless armed guards patrolling its perimeter and its confines. Getting inside without getting caught would probably be very difficult, as simply getting by the main gate did not guarantee they would succeed in their mission here. There were surveillance cameras dotted all around the compound, no doubt hooked up to an elaborate security network that was maintained by an AI. That AI would be able to spot intruders almost immediately. There would be a security control room somewhere, but getting there would be hard enough in itself.

Leon sat in the passenger seat of Okama's truck, dressed in a grey military uniform the retired Sergeant Major had procured for him. He also wore a matching peaked cap, one he wore low so that it shadowed over his eyes and kept part of his face hidden when he held his head low. No doubt his description and photos of him had been distributed all throughout the region in an attempt to apprehend him, but Leon was counting on the fact that the documents Okama had would get them through the main gate. After that, they would have to improvise.

As for Elise and Kal'Shayar, they were in the back of the truck, cooped up in a pair of large metal crates that were marked as 'hazardous materials'. That would probably be enough to prevent anyone from actually wanting to open up said boxes in order to search them. The boxes did look the part, being of the same model that was often used to transport radioactive materials, padded with lead lining in order to prevent any unwanted escape of radiation. Being shut up inside one of them was probably far from comfortable but it was necessary, as the authorization documents Okama had acquired were good for only two people. There was no way that they would be able to get Kal'Shayar through on them, with him being an alien and all.

The main gate was a fairly standard affair, comprised of thick metal with signs stuck to its front: one said 'RESTRICTED AREA' and another the fairly ordinary 'TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT'. There were a few

others, including a warning concerning the electrified perimeter fence and the fact that the entire place was under constant video surveillance.

Okama was at the steering wheel of the truck, bringing the vehicle slowly towards the gate. There was a large guardhouse by this gate, complete with a wide window at the front where a pair of guards sat and watched. There were several displays in front of them, most being surveillance feeds, providing a multi-angle view of the vehicle as it came to a halt at the front gate. Okama was silent as he flicked a switch by his right arm, one that brought his side's window down with a drawn out *\_whirr\_*. Leon kept his gaze low, hoping that no one would recognize him. He was aware of just how crazy this plan was but he had since decided that they had no other options. They would have to get in and find Caine, as well as Valerie. With Caine, they might be able to force him to clear their names. If that did not work, there was always the option of killing him. That would not clear their names (and might make things even worse for them) but it would get rid of the main problem, as the war Caine intended to ignite would definitely cause a great deal of suffering. Leon thought of the past conversations he had had with the man, thinking that the signs of his true intentions had been there: Caine had sometimes spoke about feeling 'useless' during peace-time, something that the Spartan could relate to but did not feel particularly strongly about. Apparently, Caine felt very strongly, enough for him to essentially turn traitor and kill off the very people who were in charge of the UNSC. Now he had emergency executive powers along with a number of powerful supporters and was probably working his influence to get rid of or placate any of those left who may resist his new authority. There was probably a good reason why he had come to this facility, as it made a fine place to take people one wanted to 'disappear'.

Leon remained silent, watching as one guard walked up to Okama's window. The guard was a youngish sort, male and over six feet tall. His uniform, complete with black armour vest, signified him as part of a private security force. A female guard, of average height with short brown hair, stepped up to Leon's window. She watched him through the glass, a simple precaution so that both sides of the vehicle were covered along with its occupants.

"Good morning," Okama said, his voice friendly. He reached into a pocket on his uniform's shirt, bringing out a small data-stick that contained the authorization documents.

"Hello, sir," the guard said, though he sounded bored. There was little for them to do out here and their days were fairly routine, spent checking the vehicles that came and went from the facility.  
"May I see your authorization?"

Okama handed over the data-stick, keeping up the friendly visage as the guard walked over to the guardhouse and handed the item to one of the soldiers sitting inside. Leon watched this as well, feeling a growing sense of dread, thinking that the whole plan would collapse and leave them exposed out here. The female guard standing by Leon's window started towards the rear of the truck before she stopped and pulled down the ramp there.

Okama stuck his head out the window, peering around the side to look towards the truck's rear.

"We're transporting radioactive materials to the weapons research lab," he lied, speaking matter-of-factly. "Are you sure you want to search back there? I can't guarantee that the containers are stopping all of the radiation. The sooner we get them into a proper and secure lab, the better. We could all be going sterile right now for all we know." He smiled at the guard, apparently amused at the thought.

The guard hesitated for a moment and then, seemingly satisfied, closed the ramp and returned to the front of the truck. By now the guard in the guardhouse had emerged, walking to Okama's side window and handing him back the data-stick.

"Everything checks out," he said. There was not a single hint of suspicion in his voice, so clearly the plan was working as it should. Leon could only hope that this lasted.

"Great." Okama watched as the gate in front of them slid open, allowing them entry into the facility. Leon felt some relief as they started on through the gate, taking a moment to look over to Okama. He seemed quite calm, almost confident as he brought the truck around a corner and started for one of the larger buildings. There were a lot of guards out here on patrol, some even up on rooftops keeping watch on the grounds of the compound. Okama took the truck into a narrow alley that ran between two of the larger warehouse structures, bringing it to a halt as he surveyed the area around them. There were no visible surveillance cameras here but there were a pair of guards up ahead, their backs turned as they kept watch on a loading area behind one of the buildings.

"Is this where we get off?" Leon asked as he used one hand to take off his cap. He stuffed the cap under the seat, catching a glimpse of himself in the rear-view mirror. He had formed a healthy looking stubble across his chin and currently had a great deal of sweat forming upon his brow. He was surprised at how tired he looked but he supposed that it was understandable given what he had been through. Being betrayed in such a way by a man he thought he could trust had taken a toll on him, especially considering what had happened the day before.

"There should be a security control room not far from here," Okama said. He reached under his seat, pulling out a map that he unfolded and spread across the dashboard in front of him. It was a layout of the compound, presumably another item he had acquired from his contacts that had made this mission possible. He pointed to where they were on the map and then traced his finger along one of the narrow roads within, pointing to where a smaller and more official building was located.

"That's one of the administration buildings," he said. "It's probably surrounded by surveillance cameras, but the thing is there's a ventilation system that runs between some of these buildings." He looked up from the map and pointed to the warehouse structure to their left. Leon's gaze was directed upwards to a fire escape that went down from the building's roof.

"There should be a way into the system up there," Okama said. "And then you've got to use it to get into the administration building." He rolled up the map and handed it to Leon, who stuffed it into his jacket.

"You're not coming?" He asked.

Okama shook his head.

"I'm your getaway driver," he said, smiling. He clearly found this amusing. "I'll wait here, but I can't guarantee how long I can remain until someone comes by to check things out." He paused, his gaze going to his front as he watched something through the windscreens.

"Speak of the Devil," he uttered. Leon followed his gaze, seeing that the two guards who had been further ahead had now turned around and were making their way towards them.

Leon opened his side's door and climbed out into the cold morning air, closing the door behind him before starting around to the truck's rear. He did this as innocently as he could but one of the guards called out to him, causing him to stop in his tracks.

"Why have you parked here?" The guard asked, approaching the Spartan. "This truck is marked for the science facility. That's on the other side of the compound."

The guard stopped by the front of the truck while his friend proceeded around to the other side, his gaze going to Okama who remained sitting in the driver's seat.

"I was just going out for some fresh air," Leon lied. He nodded towards Okama, before adding: "My friend just wanted to have a smoke, that's all."

Okama emerged from the truck, giving his best friendly smile as he walked around the vehicle to where Leon was. The other guard followed, putting the two of them a short distance apart. This was exactly what Leon had wanted, though he knew better than to simply kill the guards. These two men were only doing their jobs. Instead, Leon just took a step closer to one of them, ignoring the dull throbbing in his lower back.

"If you want, we'll move the truck," he said. The guard only nodded, about to say something else but Leon did not let him. Instead, the Spartan grabbed him with one hand and threw him into the other guard, sending both falling onto the ground. With the two of them momentarily stunned, Leon set upon both, grabbing one around the neck and applying one of the moves he had been taught during his earliest training. He wrapped an arm around the soldier's neck and squeezed tightly, limiting the blood-flow and sending the man into unconsciousness. Okama had set upon the other guard, opting for a more old-fashioned approach as he delivered a powerful right hook across the man's face. His head snapped back and he fell against the truck, landing in a heap on the ground. With both guards incapacitated, Leon picked one up and took him around to the truck's rear.

Pulling down the ramp, Leon carried the guard into the confines of the truck's rear cabin. Here were a few of the large metal crates, the three of which were locked shut though a few careful drill-holes allowed for air to pass through them. Leon dumped the unconscious guard behind the crates before he unlocked the nearest two of them, pushing open their lids. Behind him, Okama appeared dragging along

the other unconscious guard, dumping him on top of his buddy.

Out of the two boxes Leon had opened, both Elise and Kal'Shayar emerged. Elise was sweating and breathing heavily, relieved to finally be out of the confines of the box. Kal'Shayar looked unfazed and immediately climbed out, adjusting his helmet and the blue heads-up display visor that had been brought down over his left eye.

"You two took your time," Elise said, climbing out of the box. She brushed herself down and stretched her aching muscles. She attempted to smooth out the creases that had appeared in her uniform jacket but was unsuccessful.

"We have to get moving," Leon said. "Okama will stay here while we head up into the ventilation system and work our way into the security room."

"We're going to go crawling through vents?" Elise did not like the sound of this. "I've just spent over an hour cooped up in a box barely big enough for me to lie down in. Now I have to go vent crawling?"

"You're not claustrophobic, are you?"

Elise shook her head.

"I suppose there's no other way?" She asked.

"Not unless you want to shoot your way inside," Okama suggested. That option was not exactly appealing, especially considering the amount of people they would have to go up against.

"The vents will give us the element of surprise," Kal'Shayar said. "The issue is, how big are they? Are they large enough for any of us to fit inside?"

>Leon exchanged glances with Okama, who simply shrugged and shook his head.<p>

"We'll have to find out," the Spartan replied. None of them were armed, though Elise had stowed a few side-arms in the box with her. Leon took one of them now, as did the Commander, while Kal'Shayar relinquished one of the unconscious guards of his pistol and spare magazines. If all went to plan they would not need to start shooting until they found Caine. The security control room would give them what they needed to locate the renegade General, as well as Valerie.

Leon was the first out of the truck, keeping his pistol gripped in his right hand as he scanned the area ahead. It was clear from what he could see so he directed the others to follow before heading out and going for the fire escape. He started up it, followed by Elise and Kal'Shayar while Okama closed the truck's rear ramp and remained inside, keeping watch.

The ladder went up the full length of the building, taking them onto the roof. Up here, about four floors up, was a guard on routine patrol. He had his back turned and was standing by the edge of the roof to Leon's right. The Spartan signalled to Elise and Kal'Shayar to remain where they were as he climbed onto the roof and started

towards the guard, walking slowly and quietly as he closed the distance.

The guard happened to turn around as he closed in, about to start walking along the roof when he saw the Spartan approach. He went to shout but Leon prevented this, tackling him down so that they were mere inches from the edge of the rooftop. He forced an arm around the man's neck, holding it tightly for several seconds before causing the guard to fall unconscious. Letting him go, Leon looked over at the ladder where Elise was just climbing onto the roof. He directed her to the grating nearby which lead directly into the ventilation system. There were a few of them, all the same size. As for the unconscious guard, Leon knew it was only a matter of time before he woke up and sounded the alarm. Their window of opportunity was getting smaller at an alarming rate.

"That's going to be a tight fit," Elise said as she crouched by one of the gratings. Leon walked over and knew right away that he would not be able to fit.

"You and Kal'Shayar go in," he said. "I'll watch from up here." He then pulled the map Okama had given him out of his jacket, handing it over to Elise. "You'll need this. The way to the security room is marked on that map."

Elise nodded, tucking the map into her own jacket. She looked over at Kal'Shayar who was just approaching before putting her hands to the grating. She pulled but the thing was on too tightly. Leon just stepped forwards and delivered a powerful kick to the grating which knocked it off of its screws, sending it clattering into the vent below.

"Thanks," Elise said. Leon simply nodded in acknowledgement as he watched the Commander begin her slow climb inside. She disappeared into the dark and dusty confines of the ventilation duct, followed closely by Kal'Shayar. Once they were gone, Leon was left alone on the rooftop with only an unconscious guard for company. At least now he could make sure the guard did not wake up and sound the alarm.

He walked over to the guard and stripped him of his firearm, stowing it well out of reach before searching the man's pockets. There was a pair of handcuffs among his items so it was clear to Leon what to do. He cuffed one of the man's hands to a section of piping before using his belt as a makeshift gag, tying it over the man's mouth and tightening it around his head. Sitting down across from the unconscious guard, Leon opened one of the pouches he had taken from the man and found a few nutrient bars inside. Taking one, he peeled off the wrapper and proceeded to eat, something he had neglected on doing for well over thirty hours. It was no wonder he had been feeling so tired and even the bland taste of a standard nutrient bar was a welcome feeling.

\* \* \*

><p>Located within the underground section of the facility, Lev'Kanar sat alone in an observation room, leaning back in his chair as he closed his eyes and relaxed. He had a great deal on his mind, mainly concerning the human General and the extent of how much they would collaborate. The Skirmisher already had plans on ditching the General and returning to his own schemes but as of right now, mutual

cooperation was in the best interests of both of them.<p>

As for their prisoners, the Sangheili known as Jerashar Wittron sat beaten and bloodied in a cell nearby. A surveillance feed from that cell was displayed on one of the computers before Lev'Kanar, allowing the Skirmisher to watch the Sangheili if he chose. At the moment, Lev'Kanar was content with resting, occasionally mulling over the events of the past forty-eight hours. So far, in his view at least, things had gone off without a hitch. He had Valerie Nevas locked in a cell further down the hall and unsurprisingly the human female had been very uncooperative, but it was of no matter to him. General Caine was more worried about what her friends may do, as they could expose him and what he had done. Lev'Kanar was not worried and knew that it was very unlikely that Leon, Elise or his father would be able to expose them. Even if they killed Caine, they would still be fugitives and the UNSC would still be in chaos. With the Security Council gone, their leadership was completely gutted. What Caine did was of no real importance, as Lev'Kanar had already achieved part of what he had wanted. What came next would depend on what the General did.

Lev'Kanar had much dislike for humans, though working with the General brought benefits that he found very useful. He knew that Valerie was responsible for the death of his mate and children, but he had not decided on what to do with her just yet. Instead, he wondered whether it would be worth killing her or not. Part of him found killing her a bit on the bland side, as it would certainly be satisfying but he feared that such satisfaction would only be temporary. He wanted to do something that would make that feeling last.

So he left her and remained indecisive about what he would do. It was likely her friends would try and rescue her, something that he was relying on when it came to getting rid of them. He mulled over what he would do to his father when he found him, discounting merely killing him. As much as he disliked his father, there was still some familial love there. It annoyed him somewhat, but it was undeniable. He wondered whether he could convince his father of what he was doing, to try and see that his crusade was for good reason. He doubted Kal'Shayar would listen to him, but it was worth a try.

General Caine stepped into the room at that moment, causing Lev'Kanar to open his eyes and watch the human enter. Caine was puffing on a cigar again, a curious human thing that seemed to involve the inhalation of smoke. Lev'Kanar doubted that this was good for their health. He supposed that the humans had developed advanced medical techniques to fix any adverse effects that might have resulted from this bad habit, but it still seemed like a foolish thing to do, in his view.

"How goes the interrogation, General?" Lev'Kanar asked. Caine did not seem too interested in talking with him and instead watched the surveillance monitors at the wall, his back turned to the Skirmisher.

"The Elite keeps threatening me," Caine said without turning around, sounding amused. "Keeps saying how his people will come and kill me. How by keeping him detained will be considered an act of war."

Lev'Kanar remained seated, getting the impression that Caine was a bit too pleased with himself. So far things had gone very well for him. The falsified evidence had managed to paint the Sangheili as responsible for the attack on the headquarters in Sydney, resulting in an understandable public uproar. There were already officials calling in and telling the General that they were behind him completely, willing to follow up on any move he makes against the Sangheili. Though the Kig-Yar had been involved in the attack, even shown in some of the 'evidence', the General had gone to some length to ensure that these were confirmed as nothing but mercenaries. It was true to an extent, though Lev'Kanar was not really getting paid for his services.

"Thing is, war is what we want." Caine turned around at that point, looking towards the Skirmisher. "The Elites are divided and their government is fractured by infighting. Humanity, on the other hand, is stronger than ever. We have an edge over the other races now. We've given ourselves an advantage by reverse-engineering the Forerunner technology we've found over the years. The Elites haven't done that. They don't even know how to maintain some of the technology they have. With the Prophets gone, their society is on the brink of collapse. We can move in, sweep away what remains of their military and subjugate their population."

Lev'Kanar said nothing in response to this. He knew what Caine wanted and he knew that the human was ambitious, hungry for power. Lev'Kanar doubted that the Sangheili would be such a pushover, but he did know that the humans would most likely win a war if one did begin. Once the Sangheili became a mere subject race to the burgeoning human empire, the humans would likely turn their attention to the other alien races. So far relations between them and the Kig-Yar had been fairly mundane, with some trading but little else. Judging from the obvious disgust the General had for the Kig-Yar (something he had hidden quite well until recently), it seemed likely he would use his power to go to war with the Kig-Yar at some point in the future. Lev'Kanar knew that working with Caine carried with it many risks, most stemming from the man's clear dislike of aliens and human supremist attitude. They were only working together because they had mutual goals. Lev'Kanar already had plans laid out for when he no longer needed the General and he was certain that the General had similar plans to betray him.

"Is that all you want, General?" Lev'Kanar asked, rising out of his seat. "Power? Humans as the ultimate rulers?"

"Not just power. Payback. Order through chaos. We get rid of the Sangheili and we'll be doing a favour for the rest of the galaxy. A war is inevitable, but if we start it before they can organize themselves, we'll win it. We win that war and we'll have peace. Proper peace. The Grunts aren't a threat and you Kig-Yar are actually reasonable. The Sangheili are the ultimate threat to humanity."

"What of the recent attack on one of your cities?" Lev'Kanar asked. He had heard of an entire human city being wiped out by a mysterious weapon, though details were relatively vague. This attack had occurred some months before, with the weapon having struck from orbit. If anything, it was evidence that there were even greater threats to humanity than the former Covenant races.

"That is an indication that humanity needs to be stronger than ever," Caine replied. "We get rid of the Sangheili, we take their worlds, their technology and utilize them all for ourselves. We will be ready for whatever's coming."

Lev'Kanar nodded. He found this all rather unlikely, especially given what he intended. The future of his race had always been at the forefront of his mind. When war did erupt, the Kig-Yar would be able to exploit it and even come out on top. Lev'Kanar had the means of ensuring the future of his race, hidden away on a far away world. If only his father had listened when he had said he could save Jeril...

The surveillance feeds switched off abruptly, the screens reverting to white noise. Caine saw this and frowned, approaching an intercom on the wall. Putting a finger to one of the buttons, he spoke into it:

"Control, this is the General. What just happened to the surveillance feeds in Sector Seven?"

There was no response, save for faint static. Caine took his hand away from the intercom and turned to Lev'Kanar. Unlike Caine, the Skirmisher had been expecting something like this to occur sooner or later.

"You look surprised, General," Lev'Kanar said.

"What are you saying? That this could be your father's doing?"

Lev'Kanar said nothing. Instead, he walked out of the room, heading into the dreary grey cement corridor beyond before making his way to the cell where Valerie was located. She was seated on a bunk in the corner of the small cell, her gaze directed to the floor as she contemplated what to do with herself. Lev'Kanar unlocked the door, stepping through once it slid open. Valerie looked towards him, eyeing him carefully as he walked inside.

"We have encountered some unexpected technical difficulties," Lev'Kanar said. He walked right up to her, peering down at where she sat, resisting the urge to simply reach out and throttle her by the throat. "I believe your friends may have something to do with it."

Caine walked in at that moment, watching the two of them with a frown.

"I just heard that we may have intruders on the base," he said. He directed his gaze towards Valerie. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about this, would you?"

There was no answer from Valerie. Lev'Kanar reached out with one hand and grabbed her by the collar, hoisting her up from the bunk and onto her feet. He looked her directly in the eyes, his anger flaring up despite his best efforts to control it.

"Your friends are fools," he spat, shifting his grip on her so that it moved from her collar to her throat. "They want to rescue you,

even kill the General, yet they do exactly what I expected them to do. They are here now, on this base, and they fall directly into the trap I have laid out. You were not expecting that, were you?"

"What trap?" Caine inquired.

"I will ensure they find out exactly where you are," Lev'Kanar said. "And when they arrive, several of my troops will kill them while you watch on. Maybe then you will feel what it is like to watch those you were close to perish right before your eyes."

"Is there something you're not telling me?" Caine stepped forwards as Lev'Kanar threw Valerie back onto the bunk. The Skirmisher turned around to face the General.

"I knew that the others would come here," he said. "Since you have been preoccupied with other matters, mainly the falsification of evidence in order to gain the support of others, I used some of my own soldiers to prepare an ambush. My father and his new friends will come here searching for you and for Sergeant Nevas and they will reach you. When they do, they will die and Valerie here will watch." He gave his species' equivalent of a smile, partially showing his sharp teeth.

Caine nodded, apparently on board with this plan.

"Good to hear that you're taking the initiative," he said, sounding impressed.

"It was the least I could do." Lev'Kanar knew the time would come when he would need to kill the General, but until then he had no problem with pretending to be on friendly terms with the ambitious human. It was clear that the dislike he had of the General was a feeling that the human returned in regards to the young Skirmisher and his species.

### 23. Lost Fighter

\*\*Lost Fighter\*\*

February 14th, 2558

"Did you do that?"

The flickering lights within the security room were a telltale sign that things were not quite right. Kal'Shayar stood by the door of the room, an unconscious pair of guards on the floor nearby while Elise worked one of the computers at the wall. The surveillance camera feeds had been deactivated but it would not be long before someone came by to investigate. This particular room was located in one of the main buildings, situated off of a grey carpeted corridor that ran through the building and lead to an elevator that in turn travelled down into the base's underground sections.

Kal'Shayar looked over to Elise, quite alert now that the lights had gone out. He had a pistol in his right hand and would occasionally glance into the corridor, keeping a keen eye out for any guards who may decide to come by. So far the area was clear though the lights had gone out, leaving the inside of the building rather dark. There

were a few windows in adjoining rooms that allowed the midday sunlight to stream in but otherwise things had darkened considerably. It was not what either of them had been expecting. Something somewhere had gone wrong and neither of them knew what.

"The lights?" Elise shook her head. "That wasn't me."

Kal'Shayar looked back into the corridor, his sensitive eyesight giving him an advantage in the lowlight conditions. There was still no one out here. So far their infiltration of the base had been far too easy, almost as if they were being allowed in. He wondered if maybe Caine or Lev'Kanar had been expecting them to break-in and had planned accordingly, hoping to catch them in some kind of trap. It was an unnerving possibility, one that seemed more likely the more Kal'Shayar thought about it.

"Do you know where Caine is?" He turned back to Elise, who was still working one of the computers.

"He's down in the underground levels somewhere, but I can't pinpoint where exactly," she replied. "We're going to have to find him ourselves."

"Then we should go and regroup with the Lieutenant," Kal'Shayar suggested.

Elise frowned at something on her computer, tapping a few of the keys and causing one of the deactivated surveillance feeds to switch back on. It showed a view of the area outside where a few guards now lay dead. Something was moving past their bodies, a large shimmer that seemed to bend the light around it. This was the unmistakable sight of a camouflaged entity and judging from its size, the entity in question was a Sangheili. There were four more of them following the lead, each camouflaged so that they were practically invisible, easily missed by the naked eye. They were walking straight into the building and had so far remained undetected.

"Elite Spec Ops?" Elise turned to Kal'Shayar, who was just as surprised as she was with the development. "They must be here to break out Jerashar. That might explain the power drain. They've probably set up some kind of jammer somewhere nearby, cutting the base off from the rest of the world."

Both of them knew the dangers now. These Sangheili Special Operations types were some of the most highly trained and experienced soldiers the Sangheili had at their disposal. The fact that they had somehow arrived on Earth, at this very base without being detected, said much about their skills at infiltration. Even so, it would not be long before the people in the base realized what was going on and a full-scale firefight occurred.

"What do you suggest we do?" Kal'Shayar asked. He was playing with the possible courses of action in his mind, thinking it might be better for them to pull out before they were caught in a crossfire. Elise seemed to be thinking otherwise, though he could understand why. They had come this far and there was little to be gained from backing out now.

"We should warn Leon," Elise suggested. "He's probably still up on the roof."

"We might be better off leaving altogether," Kal'Shayar said. "This was not part of the plan."

Elise frowned, clearly disagreeing.

"We didn't have much of a plan to begin with," she said.

Kal'Shayar heard a loud thump from somewhere down the corridor and peered around the doorway near him, watching as a door further down was blown open in a flash of blue-white plasma energy. Out of the smoke came the camouflaged form of a Sangheili soldier, its outline visible amongst the haze. The soldier was followed by two others, all of which were camouflaged. Such camouflage was far from perfect and anyone with decent eyesight would have been able to make out a vague, shimmering outline in close quarters. Kal'Shayar's sensitive eyes had an even easier time picking out the Sangheili forms.

"We have to leave," Kal'Shayar said quietly, glancing back at Elise. The ventilation duct they had used to get inside was open in the ceiling above them, but crawling through had been time consuming. To get back to where Leon was would be difficult and the pair had needed to take a few short falls in the ventilation duct. Climbing back up would be a bit trickier.

The three Sangheili had started to make their way past the security room. Kal'Shayar stood around the doorway, just out of sight, keeping a finger on the trigger of his pistol. Elise ducked behind a desk and remained silent as one of the Sangheili soldiers stopped at the doorway and proceeded to step inside. They clearly knew the purpose of the room and probably intended to use the computers here to find out Jerashar's location.

However, the trio were interrupted by the crackle of assault rifle fire from somewhere down the corridor. One of the Sangheili stumbled as its camouflage failed and its personal shield flared, causing its bulky form to become completely visible. The Special Operations outfit consisted of thick purple-blue armour and a sleek, tight-fitting helmet. This particular Sangheili was armed with a large plasma repeater and the large alien was quick to return fire with it. Two armoured guards had appeared at the end of the corridor, pouring down assault rifle fire which caused the Sangheili to scatter.

Kal'Shayar was within breathing distance when one of them stepped inside, deactivating its camouflage as it did so. It saw the Skirmisher and gave a momentary look of confusion before it prepared to club the alien with its plasma rifle. Kal'Shayar was faster, side-stepping the attack and grabbing its arms, twisting it at an awkward angle that caused it to drop the plasma rifle. Elise was up from behind the desk and opened fire at the Sangheili, the pistol rounds glancing off of its personal shield as it broke free of Kal'Shayar's grip and punched the Skirmisher in the chest.

Kal'Shayar felt the wind knocked out of him as he fell backwards, falling against the computer monitors behind him. He saw the Sangheili produce the hilt of a plasma sword from its waist and a slight flick of the wrist activated the two-pronged shimmering blade. It brought the sword down but Kal'Shayar rolled out of the way,

causing the Sangheili to plunge the blade into one of the computers and send sparks flying as the computer was effectively cut in two. Out in the corridor, the two other Sangheili had begun to fall back, exchanging fire with the humans in the narrow confines. One of them pulled a plasma grenade from where it had been clipped to its waist before tossing the glowing blue ball down the corridor.

The human guards scattered as the grenade exploded, sending a wave of white-hot plasma energy blossoming forth. The whole room shook as the explosion burned smouldering holes through the nearby walls, sending fragments of wood and steel flying about in the wake of the detonation.

Kal'Shayar was still set upon by the Sangheili officer, now standing only a few metres from it as it stood before him, energy blade held at the ready. Elise had crouched behind the desk in order to reload her pistol, doing it rather quickly as Kal'Shayar ducked underneath another swing of the Sangheili's energy blade. He raised his own pistol, firing off a shot before he was forced to pull back his arm and jump backwards, the energy blade swinging through the empty space he had just been occupying.

Elise rose up from behind the desk and opened fire, both hands on her sidearm as she began unloading the entire magazine into the bulky alien. The Sangheili's shields flared and then gave out, causing the next few shots to punch into its armour, penetrating in most places and causing dark purple blood to spurt out. The alien roared and then turned around, charging towards Elise. She dived out of the way of its angered charge, hitting the floor as the alien knocked the desk aside and turned around to face the human, preparing to bring the sword down onto where Elise had fallen.

Kal'Shayar saw the plasma repeater that he had caused the Sangheili to drop moments before and so tossed aside his pistol, diving for the gun and grabbing it before somersaulting back onto his feet. He pulled the trigger (which, on this weapon, was more of a pressure-pad) and sent a withering hail of pink energy bolts into the Sangheili officer, each of them burning through its armour. The alien roared again and turned around but Kal'Shayar kept the weapon firing, feeling it heating up in his hands, building towards critical levels. The Sangheili tried to close the distance through the hail of fire but stumbled and fell into a heap, purple blood pooling around its form while it began twitching. Kal'Shayar took a step closer to it and fired a few more shots into its back, causing the twitching to cease and the weapon to overheat.

He threw the overheated weapon aside and ran to where Elise was lying, helping her back onto her feet. Out in the corridor, the exchange of fire continued between the Sangheili and the human guards.

"We should find Caine," Elise said. "We're in here, now. I have some idea about where he is. Same goes for your son."

"What about the Lieutenant?"

"He'll probably find his own way inside."

Kal'Shayar nodded. It seemed likely, knowing Leon. However, there was still the matter of actually reaching the elevator which meant

getting through both Sangheili Spec Ops soldiers and human guards. There was only one way out of the room and that would take them straight into the crossfire.

Kal'Shayar knelt by the dead Sangheili and took one of the alien's plasma grenades before standing back up and walking over to the far wall. Activating it, he stuck the grenade against the wall and ran towards Elise, grabbing her and pushing her behind the partially wrecked desk. Covering her body with his own, he awaited the inevitable explosion.

The grenade went off only seconds later, filling the entire room with a flash of brilliant blue-white light that was accompanied by the deafening crackling sound of the explosion, a noise that caused Kal'Shayar's sensitive ears to start ringing for a moment. Elise covered her own as the room was filled with the smell of smoke and burning plasma, smouldering fragments of wood and metal raining down all around them. It was over as quickly as it had started and Kal'Shayar was the first onto his feet before he turned around and helped Elise back up. The back wall of the room was all but gone and the office beyond was littered with debris, though it gave them a direct route out of the security room. One of the Sangheili soldiers had been taking cover in this room and lay stunned on the floor, only just rising back onto his feet.

Elise was the one to fire at this Sangheili, emptying a few pistol rounds into the alien, causing it to fall backwards as the bullets punched through its chest armour. One of them must have struck a heart as the alien died pretty quickly, purple blood pooling around its motionless form. Kal'Shayar stepped through the hole in the wall and picked up the dead Sangheili's carbine, making sure to check the current magazine before taking the spares the Sangheili had been carrying.

The third Sangheili had fallen back and gone from view, allowing the human guards at the far end of the corridor to begin advancing. The corridor itself was a mess now, littered with debris with some purple and red blood stains in places, along with bullet holes and plasma burns all over the walls that had melted away paint and turned the wood within to charcoal. Kal'Shayar approached the doorway of the office and leaned around the side, watching two of the humans start forwards.

It would have been a lot simpler to just shoot them but they were not the enemy, at least not directly. They were doing their jobs, forced to hold off an unexpected Sangheili raid. Kal'Shayar waited for the first one to get close before stepping out and grabbing the man, throwing his head into the wall before launching his unconscious body into the female soldier behind him. Both of them hit the ground, with Kal'Shayar going for the dark-haired female soldier, picking her up by the vest and pushing her into the wall. She looked startled, understandably, and Kal'Shayar's eyes were gazing straight into her own.

"I need the means to access the elevators," he said. The soldier said nothing, clearly defiant. Kal'Shayar held her against the wall with one hand while he pulled her sidearm out of her waist holster, switching off its safety and pressing the barrel into her gut.

"Please," he said, opening his mouth a little in order to reveal the rows of sharp teeth. The soldier put a hand to a pouch on the front of her armour vest and Kal'Shayar lowered her from the wall, using one hand to open the vest and pull out the amber coloured pass-card.

Kal'Shayar nodded in thanks before elbowing the human sharply in the face, knocking her unconscious. He let her go and allowed her to slump down the wall before he turned around to face Elise, handing her the pass-card.

"Go to the elevator," he said. "I will cover you."

Elise gave a curt nod before running down the corridor, working her way through the lingering smoke before arriving at the elevator doors. She slid the pass-card through a slot in the panel by the doors and a green light switched on, followed by the doors sliding open. Kal'Shayar kept watch on the corridor behind them as he made his way towards the elevator, stepping into it after Elise. The doors closed and Elise tapped a button on the panel for one of the lower floors. The pair was silent, both taking this reprieve to catch their breaths.

After a moment, Elise spoke, getting Kal'Shayar's attention.

"What will we do if we find your son?" She asked. "Are you going to kill him?"

This was something Kal'Shayar had given some careful thought to over the past day or so. It was not something he had really reached a decision on, despite the option of killing his own son being the more reasonable one. Lev'Kanar was dangerous and charismatic, clear from the way he had gained so many followers and had been one of the masterminds behind the attack on the UNSC headquarters in Sydney.

"I am still thinking about it," Kal'Shayar replied after a lengthy pause. Elise said nothing, unable to think of anything to say. Kal'Shayar had lost so much and now there was a good chance he would need to kill his only remaining child. It was not something he was particularly looking forward to.

\* \* \*

><p>Leon was still on the roof of the warehouse building when the Sangheili raid began. It happened very suddenly, starting with an explosion at the front gate. He was up onto his feet within seconds of hearing it, racing to the edge of the building as he shifted his gaze towards the smouldering ruins of the gate in question. However, this had been a diversionary explosion, as several others occurred at different places along the perimeter fence, each one serving to gain the attention of the nearby guards. Leon took his pistol into his hands and kept watch as camouflaged Sangheili soldiers stormed into the compound. Most switched off their camouflage when they engaged the perimeter guards, an exchange of weapons fire occurring as the human guards here tried to organize a decent defence against the unexpected intruders.<p>

Leon's gaze was diverted when he heard a shout somewhere behind him. Two guards had emerged onto the rooftop, coming out of a hatch at the far end. Both were armed with compact submachine guns and did not

hesitate in opening fire at the intruder. Presumably they thought this was another alien terrorist attack, complete with the apparent human collaborators, Leon being one of them in their eyes. The Spartan had little time to react, diving behind one of the nearby rectangular air conditioning units. Rounds pinged off of the metal and kicked up cement dust as they impacted the roofing near Leon. He quickly rose to his feet and leaned around the side of the unit, firing off a few shots. He gunned down one of the guards before the other backed away, spraying fire in his direction as he ducked behind a cement partition. Leon checked his ammunition, finding that he only had about four rounds left in his current magazine. He had no spares, much to his chagrin. He knew he would need to place his shots carefully and though he felt some regret for killing these guards, he was only defending himself. The real threats were Caine and Lev'Kanar, along with the newly arrived Sangheili taskforce.

The guard was reloading, judging from the clicking sounds as he fumbled the magazine before sliding it home. Leon stepped around the air conditioning unit and raised his pistol, firing a shot that winged the guard in the right shoulder before the next one blew a chunk out of his chest. The guard dropped his weapon and fell backwards, blood oozing from his wounds. Leon approached the body and knelt down to pick up the submachine gun, along with the spare magazines the guard had been wearing. Now with a decent amount of ammunition, Leon made his way back to the edge of the rooftop and looked down to where Okama had parked the truck.

The Sergeant Major was nowhere in sight and the truck had gone, leading Leon to believe that he had left the compound. This was understandable, given what was happening, but Leon had thought that Okama had more guts than that. Nonetheless, Leon used the fire escape ladder to climb down, making it to the ground just as a pair of Special Operations Sangheili rounded a corner up ahead. Both of them had plasma rifles and were quick to mow down the two guards up ahead, their bodies convulsing with each impact of plasma. Smouldering, the guards hit the ground and the two Sangheili turned their attention towards Leon. Blue plasma bolts zipped by as he remained close to the wall, backing away into a steel door that was locked but no match for his Spartan strength. He turned around and kicked the door with considerable force, tearing it off of its bottom hinges. With one hand he grabbed the bottom of the door and pushed, ripping it away from its top hinges which in turn allowed him to hurl the door aside, allowing him entry into the warehouse.

He found himself in a narrow steel corridor that shortly opened onto a vast warehouse area. Large shelving aisles ran down its length, filled to the brim with assorted metal and wood crates of varying sizes. There were no guards here but there was a visible office on one of the upper floors, a set of glass windows providing a view of the whole warehouse from its vantage point. Leon started making his way through the aisles, thinking it best he regroup with Elise and Kal'Shayar. This would be a lot easier said than done, as he had no idea where the pair might have gone too. The Sangheili would have gone straight for the main building if they had any tactical sense, so both Elise and Kal'Shayar could be caught right in the middle of this raid.

Leon had no idea how the Sangheili could have gotten to Earth to carry out this raid, but they were resourceful. They must have gone to some trouble to get here and were going to even more trouble in an

attempt to rescue Jerashar. It may as well have been a declaration of war and Leon had a feeling that it would be responded to as such.

Making his way through the aisles, Leon arrived at another door, this one unlocked. Pushing it open, he continued into a narrow corridor that lead to an exit, one that opened onto an outdoor area that was currently occupied by several armed guards. They stood around the main entrance to the tunnels that ran underneath the compound, with a number of makeshift barricades set up around their positions, comprised of metal shields and parked vehicles. The guards had their attentions diverted to the group of Sangheili Spec Ops soldiers moving towards them past the main administration building up ahead. The Sangheili were advancing relentlessly, laying down heavy fire with their energy weapons while the human guards held their ground. Leon figured he could get by and get into the tunnels, as that would most likely be the place where he could find Valerie, even Caine and Lev'Kanar if he was lucky.

Taking a moment to survey his surroundings, Leon ducked behind a parked van. None of the guards seemed to be bothered by his presence, too concerned with the Sangheili advancing on their position. Leon started to sprint along the open ground between himself and the barricades, plasma bolts flying by with a few almost winging him. He could feel the heat of his close shaves against his skin but he was back within cover before the aliens could adjust their aim accordingly. Diving over one of the metal barricades, Leon performed a quick roll that brought him back onto his feet. The guards here were under heavy fire, with only one of them taking real notice of his presence.

Leon was not sure what to do in this particular situation, so he simply turned around and started towards the tunnel entrance, hoping the guards would be too busy with the shootout with the Spec Ops Sangheili to pay attention to him. He was about right, although he heard one of the officers among the group shouting at him to stop.

The Spartan came to the bulkhead door, finding it to be partially open much to his relief. Getting through would have been rather more difficult otherwise. He worked his way through, entering the concrete tunnel underneath, finding a few guards inside who were busy loading up their weapons. There were three of them, outfitted in black armoured uniforms that bore a shoulder patch emblem of a goat's head. They were part of General Caine's First Reaction Battalion, a group that Colonel Green had been a part of. They would probably react to his arrival far more than the normal guards would have. It was even likely they would receive a healthy monetary reward for eliminating Leon.

"It's you!" One of them exclaimed with surprise. The three of them scrambled to ready their weapons but Leon was already prepared, cutting them down with his submachine gun. With the three of them lying dead before him, Leon continued down the tunnel, making his way past a deserted security checkpoint before entering a more refined looking grey and blue corridor.

He got the impression that he was on the right track and this was made all the more clearer by the sign that was up on the wall nearby, providing directions to the different sections of the underground

facility. This included a 'Detainment Area' (more or less fancy speak for 'cellblock'). Leon started down the corridor, turning right at a junction before coming to another security checkpoint. Normally it would have been occupied by a few armed guards but the chaos outside had forced most guards to leave their routine posts and join in the fight. The barred gate here was locked, unfortunately, though Leon was able to force it open with his Spartan strength, tearing the computerized lock apart as the gate swung open.

He continued into the Detainment Area, passing an interrogation room. He came to the cellblock itself shortly afterwards, finding it to be a fairly wide room with about four doors, two on either side, each one opening into a cell. There were several of the black uniformed soldiers here, all members of the General's personal force of mercenaries. The General himself was here as well, with Valerie kneeling on the floor dead in the centre of the room. Leon felt all eyes fixed on him as he walked inside, submachine gun raised. He was outnumbered and outgunned, but this was not enough to deter him from a direct confrontation. Valerie's gaze noticeably lit up when she saw him but she kept quiet while Caine paced behind her. Leon got the impression that he had been expected, though this was no surprise.

"Give it up, Lieutenant," Caine said. He stopped pacing, standing a short distance behind Valerie as he looked towards Leon.

"In a few minutes, the Elites are going to come barging through the door behind me," Leon said. "Somehow, I don't think I'll be needing to give it up anytime soon. You're in deep enough shit as it is."

Caine shook his head. Valerie remained silent, carrying evidence of a beating by the way parts of her face appeared bruised. Seeing this only stirred anger within Leon, the sort that threatened to violently explode out of him at any moment. Nonetheless, he kept his gun pointed at Caine, ignoring the other soldiers who all had their weapons aimed at him.

"I knew you would come, Lieutenant," Caine said, his tone calm and collected. The General was not easily fazed, even if there were a bunch of aliens outside trying to shoot their way in. "Perhaps there is some hope for you. You clearly have talent for this sort of thing. You could help me."

"Help you with what? Starting another war?"

"It's more than that." Caine frowned, shaking his head at what he saw to be Leon's apparent lack of understanding. "It's about putting humanity on top."

"Is that all? Subjugate the other races?"

"After what they put us through during the war, they deserve it. You of all people should think that. You were in the thick of it for most of the war."

Leon had seen a lot of terrible things, but they had not caused him to lose his sense of perspective. He wondered what Caine was hoping to achieve by starting another war, as it was doubtful he simply wanted to try and conquer the other species. He would probably want

to wipe them out as well.

"Revenge against an entire species is ridiculous," Leon said. "You can't judge them on the actions of a minority. Those who fought for the Covenant were tricked into doing so. That's common knowledge."

"That doesn't excuse them for what they did."

"It doesn't give us an excuse to try and conquer them. Your plan will only lead to even more death, more suffering. I can't let you do that." Leon's finger began to press onto the trigger. Saving Valerie was one thing, but if he could kill Caine he may very well end this whole ordeal. He was being foolish, he thought this much, but right now he was acting more on emotion than on actual logic.

Valerie did something then that only she would have had the guts to do. In a quick movement she had fallen forwards and sent both legs towards Caine, knocking his own out from under him. She then rolled over and set upon him within seconds, catching the nearby mercenaries by surprise. They did not fire, fearful that they would hit Caine as he and Valerie scuffled on the floor. This was all the distraction Leon needed and he opened fire with his submachine gun, cutting down two of the soldiers before the others reacted.

Leon ran towards the nearest soldier as the bullets headed his way. Grabbing the man, he spun him around and pushed him in front of him as the rifle fire drew near. The soldier buckled and bullet fragments exploded out of his back, stinging Leon's front before he threw the bullet-riddled corpse aside. He dropped the empty submachine gun and picked up the fallen soldier's assault rifle, one that was fully loaded and this allowed him to lay down the fire quickly. He cut down another two of the soldiers, causing the others to scatter. Diving to the floor, Leon landed on a bloodied corpse and remained low as weapons fire punched into the wall behind him. Another few rounds hit the corpse, sending spurts of blood across his face, some of it ending up in his mouth and eyes. Doing his best to ignore it, he resumed shooting, riddling another one of the soldiers with bullets. He clipped another one who fell and started screaming as blood seeped out of a wound in his stomach, but no one helped him. Instead, the remaining four soldiers began to back away.

Caine threw Valerie off of him and rose to his feet, pulling his pistol out of its holster. He let off a few shots at Leon, one of which hit the bloodied corpse the Spartan had been lying near and sent a shower of blood over his head. Leon shifted his aim but his assault rifle clicked on empty, causing him to throw the weapon aside in annoyance. He pulled a grenade from the bullet-riddled corpse near him and yanked out the pin, throwing it across the room so that it landed amongst the four soldiers at the far end of the room.

Caine hit the ground once he saw the grenade, covering his head with his hands. The explosion occurred seconds later, the noise deafening within the confines of the room. Smoke and cement fragments erupted forth, along with severed and charred body parts. Leon covered his ears but it did little to ease the noise, causing some brief ringing as he rose to his feet and started to stumble his way through the smoke. He found Valerie lying on the floor, blood pooling around her. Aghast, Leon knelt by her and put an arm around her agile frame, dragging her away. He could see a bullet wound in her stomach, one

that was bleeding profusely, the result of a stray round that must have caught her during the confusion. Who had shot her, he had no idea, but he was overtaken by the fear that maybe he had been responsible.

Leon could just make out Caine through the haze but could do little to stop the man from exiting the room through the doorway up ahead. The door itself had been blown open by the grenade explosion and the general vicinity was littered with pieces of the four soldiers who had been standing near it. Leon could hear a clanging coming from one of the nearby cell doors and watched as Jerashar, missing his helmet and chest armour, came barging through it. The explosion had dented it considerably and this had given the Sangheili plenty of room to tear the door from its hinges. Jerashar looked around the blood-stained room, his gaze going to where Leon was kneeling with Valerie lying by him.

"Lieutenant?" Jerashar sounded surprised. Leon barely paid attention to him and instead focused on the woman lying on the floor near him, the one who was twitching in his grasp and was clawing her fingers against his arms.

"Leon..." Valerie croaked, her blood soaking the front of her jacket. Leon put both hands to the wound, applying as much pressure as he could. This did little to stem the blood-flow, as the exit wound on her back was considerably larger and bleeding far more quickly.

She writhed a few more times before going still. Leon simply remained where he was for a moment, holding her close while Jerashar looked down at the both of them with a sullen gaze. Leon had no idea who had shot Valerie, but it did not matter. Caine had started all of this and Leon would be the one to end it, this much he was determined to do.

He could not carry her out of here, as it would only slow him down. As reluctant as he was, he had to leave her here. He would need complete mobility in order to get out of this place alive and he would need to remain that way if he was going to have any chance of avenging the fallen Sergeant. His gaze went up to Jerashar, who was looking a bit beaten up but was otherwise well. Having him alive would no doubt help matters, as he could properly explain what was going on to the Sangheili and hopefully prevent a full-scale war from erupting.

Behind him, several Sangheili soldiers barged in, lead by one in purple and blue armour. Leon rose to his feet, turning around to face the intimidating new arrivals. He thought he recognized the one in the lead, something that was confirmed by what was said next.

"I did not expect to find you here, Spartan." Rel Valum narrowed his eyes at Leon, his lower mandibles opening slightly in an expression of mild shock.

"I can vouch for him," Jerashar said.

Leon remained silent. As grateful as he was for this, the thing that took upmost of his thoughts was revenge.

\*\*Like Father, Like Son\*\*

February 14th, 2558

Kal'Shayar had with him a typical Covenant-built 'carbine' weapon, a reliable and accurate gun that he had much experience with. He was walking a few paces in front of Elise, the weapon gripped in both of his hands as he made his way through the facility's underground corridors. They had started straight for the cellblock, hoping to find Jerashar and maybe even Caine or Lev'Kanar. Outside, the Sangheili raid was spilling into the facility's more secure areas, giving the pair much incentive to move quickly.

Elise kept pace behind him, carrying a pistol. Red lights flashed around them and a distant alarm siren wailed now and then but not enough as to become annoying. Kal'Shayar had only some idea of where he was going, using the signs up on the walls in order to guide his way through the facility. He was relatively calm, keeping himself alert as he stopped at a junction and checked both corridors at either side. The area was clear, allowing the pair to proceed.

There was one thing on his mind that concerned him and that was what to do with his son, if they found him. He was still at odds with himself over whether killing him would be the right thing to do and the indecision was rather frustrating. Kal'Shayar was used to making quick decisions and to be so conflicted on any matter was not something he enjoyed. He supposed that time and circumstance would determine what became of Lev'Kanar, as they needed to actually find the Skirmisher first. He got the feeling that Lev'Kanar would try to find them in turn once he knew they were in the base.

Most of the security forces down in this part of the facility were gone, recalled to defend more important locations. The Sangheili taskforce was working its way down into the underground sections at different points of the compound, none of them having yet caught up with Kal'Shayar and Elise. This was a welcome relief, as having to deal with both human guards and Spec Ops Sangheili soldiers at the same time was far from an ideal situation.

Kal'Shayar stopped by another T-intersection in the grey corridors. The path to the right lead towards a set of double doors that were blocked by a few red barriers, signifying construction in progress beyond. There was no real indication of where they should be going, but Kal'Shayar recalled the last sign they had passed by and the colour-coded system it used, with the different coloured lines on the floor leading the way to the areas mentioned on the sign. Dark blue signified the cellblock and the line went along the edge of the corridor's floor and under the blocked-off door. Kal'Shayar made his way towards it, throwing the flimsy plastic barriers aside before finding the door to be locked. It did not take much to force it open with the help of Elise. A single carbine shot took out the locking mechanism between the double doors, providing enough give for the pair to work their fingers through and pull it open. Behind it was a large storage area, with a partitioned lane going straight down its centre. All around was scaffolding and construction machinery, much of it deactivated. A set of catwalks were high above and numerous metal crates of varying sizes were stacked at one side of the room, out of the way of the construction work that had been going on. From what Kal'Shayar could tell, the construction work involved expanding

the room, digging more out of the surrounding underground rock as well as breaking open a few of the smaller storage rooms that had been to the sides. They now lacked doors and ceilings, having been prepared to be assimilated into the one vast storage area. The work was far from done, with metal panels and wooden frames lying about the floor near the many pieces of construction equipment. Scaffolding had been set up along the walls, as well as at the far end of the room.

It was a shortcut to the cellblock, judging by how the line going that way travelled straight down the centre of the vast warehouse-like expanse. There was a door at the far end, with catwalks up above that ran across the room and went onto higher floors. Kal'Shayar stepped up to a security checkpoint a short distance from the door he and Elise had come through. The computer terminal at the checkpoint was still switched on and in working order, but actual guards were nowhere in sight.

The Skirmisher tensed up as he felt a growing sense of unease. He turned to Elise just as the double doors behind her flew open and four human soldiers in black armoured uniforms came charging inside, two with assault rifles and the other two carrying shotguns. Elise spun around and raised her pistol, while Kal'Shayar stepped forwards with his carbine raised but the two of them were very much at a disadvantage. The four soldiers stopped ahead of the doorway, spreading out so that there were a few paces of space between them. All four raised their weapons, resulting in a rather skewed standoff. Kal'Shayar did not fancy his chances. He may be able to gun a few of them down but it was likely, no matter how fast he moved, that he would get hit. And then there was the fact that Elise was not as fast as he was and would most certainly get hit. He did not want that to happen to her. It was unlikely he would be able to live with himself if he got her killed and was reminded of how reckless he had been before he had met her. As good as it was to have someone care for him the way she did, he could no longer afford to run into situations with reckless abandon.

The sound of footsteps echoed from the far end of the room and Kal'Shayar turned around to face the noise. He watched as several more of these black-clad soldiers ran into view. They emerged from doors at the end and the sides of the room, surrounding the pair with their weapons held at the ready. Kal'Shayar kept his hands gripped tightly on his carbine, letting his aim drift over a few of the soldiers. He might have been able to shoot a few of them but now, with both he and Elise surrounded, it was unlikely he would survive. His gaze drifted to either side, taking note of the red fire extinguishers hanging on pillars along the middle of the room. There were three of them in view, each one farther away than the last.

That was when he heard the voice from above, one he recognized right away.

"I knew you would come, father."

Kal'Shayar looked up, watching as Lev'Kanar strode into view upon one of the catwalks. His son was the same as he had last seen him, wearing an armoured grey outfit and matching coat over it. He had no helmet on, as there was no need. He looked down at his father and to Elise, his expression mostly neutral though even at this distance

Kal'Shayar got the impression that he was gloating.

"I would put the weapons down, if I were you," Lev'Kanar said, his voice sounding as refined as it always had been. "The humans surrounding you are notoriously 'trigger-happy', as they would say. The General was kind enough to lend me the support."

Kal'Shayar did not lower his weapon, despite what his son had said. He glanced over at Elise, who returned the look and seemed to be waiting for his directions on what to do. She would have little luck there, as he was not quite sure himself on just how to get out of this particular situation.

"I got the impression that you hated humans," Kal'Shayar said, his gaze going back up to where his son was standing. Lev'Kanar had his hands on the railing in front of him, standing up high on the catwalk and well out of harm's way. "Why are you suddenly so willing to work with them?"

"A means to an end," Lev'Kanar replied.

"Perhaps we could talk about this?" Kal'Shayar asked. He relaxed a little, lowering his weapon but still keeping it held tightly in his arms. Elise did the same, though she had a rather reluctant expression on her face. She was not one to simply give up, regardless of the odds.

"Talk about what?" Lev'Kanar scoffed. "You seem to have made up your mind already, father. As good as it would be to have you willingly join the cause, I feel that you are simply too stubborn to admit you are wrong."

"Wrong about what?"

"About me. About what I do. I was an arms smuggler because of the wealth it provided me. It helped me fund what I am doing now. It gave me what I needed in order to secure the future of our species. I do what I do for us all. I am a patriot at heart."

Kal'Shayar doubted this, but he could tell that Lev'Kanar was sincere. It was a surprise to hear his son say all this, but he was sure there was more to what he was doing than simple loyalty to their race.

"And what does destabilizing relations between the humans and the Sangheili hope to achieve for our people?" Kal'Shayar asked. His gaze flitted back down to the soldiers in front of him, their weapons raised and ready to fire at a moment's notice. They were all faceless behind their black helmets and visors, so there was no way for Kal'Shayar to get any real idea of what they might have been thinking. They almost looked like machines.

"Not just that, father," Lev'Kanar answered. "I have secured the means to make our people powerful again. I intend to bring us into a new era, to follow in the footsteps of the great Forerunners themselves. Perhaps if you laid down your arms and gave yourselves up, I would be able to show you what I am talking about?"

"And what of your alliance with General Caine?"

"A means to an end. He will betray me given time, unless I betray him first. Right now though, we require each other's aid."

"Is that what you really believe? That the end justifies the means?" Kal'Shayar had encountered a few in the past who followed this line of thinking. He could see that his son genuinely believed in what he was doing, no matter how 'wrong' it may have appeared to be. So far Lev'Kanar was responsible for the deaths of countless innocents and was clearly unfazed by this knowledge. In fact, it was clear he intended to kill more people in pursuit of his goals. So far he had tried to ignite a war and had succeeded, judging by the Sangheili raid happening outside.

"Sometimes innocents must die for the greater good."

"The 'greater good'? Is that really what you are calling it now?" Kal'Shayar felt the anger rising within him, mingled with some disappointment towards his son. He had tried to raise the youngster properly, to stray him off of the rebellious path he had chosen. Kal'Shayar had trained Lev'Kanar from a very young age, expanding on what the military instructors taught him during his years in the military. He had tried to instil a sense of right and wrong in the youngling, but even from as early as the age of five Lev'Kanar had been a troublemaker. He had often disobeyed his father, as kids were prone to do, but when his adolescent years came Lev'Kanar became even worse in regards to his rebellious attitudes and had not grown out of them. Kal'Shayar had tried to teach him that working for the greater good of the community, for their people, was the duty of all warriors like them. Somehow this teaching had become warped in Lev'Kanar's view, as not only did he wish to help their species but to do so he actively killed innocents.

"This is not the 'greater good', " Kal'Shayar added. "This is far from 'good'. The blood of innocents covers your hands. That is nothing to be proud of. Did nothing I told you during your youth make an impression?"

"It did, in a way," Lev'Kanar said. He was unaffected by what Kal'Shayar had said. With little effort, making use of his agile yet muscular form, Lev'Kanar climbed over the railing of the catwalk and jumped. He landed on top of some nearby scaffolding with a loud thump! He did a quick roll in order to absorb the force of the landing before he came up onto his feet again and stepped off the top platform. He landed on the floor a short distance away, bending his knees with the impact before standing up straight again.

Kal'Shayar stood his ground as his son approached. Lev'Kanar stopped just behind the line of soldiers ahead.

"I remember everything you told me," Lev'Kanar said. "I have simply interpreted it differently. What I intend will make our people stronger. When the humans and the Sangheili have their war, our race will prosper."

He stepped past the soldiers, stopping a few metres from Kal'Shayar. Lev'Kanar was as tall as his father and with a similarly muscular build, though Kal'Shayar beared the hallmarks of being twice as old, with a more weathered face and edges on his plumage that had started to turn a pale colour. Skirmishers lived just as long as humans in most cases but Kal'Shayar had not been spared the physical signs of

his age as he began to near the age of fifty (in Earth years, no less).

"I am willing to die for my cause," Lev'Kanar continued. "I can rest easy in the fact that I am helping our species. What of you, father? You have too much compassion for these humans. Their aggressive tendencies threaten our species. Give them a century and they will encroach upon our territory with the hopes of expanding. They will subjugate our people and gradually wipe us out. They have the numbers and the technology. The collapse of the Covenant weakened us considerably. That is what I hope to remedy. While the humans and the Sangheili get caught up in their little war, the Kig-Yar will grow stronger. Soon, we will be the ones who will be able to subjugate the humans." He paused for a moment, leaving Kal'Shayar to mull over what he had said. The elder Skirmisher was somewhat confused, yet interested to find out just how his son intended to carry out his plans.

"I have the means to make us better than we are. I had the means to save Jeril. You did not listen then, but will you listen now?"

Kal'Shayar remained silent. Lev'Kanar sniffed the air at that point, his gaze going towards Elise. She watched his carefully as he approached, stopping a short distance in front of her.

"I detect your scent on this human, father," Lev'Kanar said, glancing back at Kal'Shayar. "I assumed it would be because the two of you have been working together and in close proximity, but now I think it is more than that." He was smiling now, knowing that he had discovered something he could very easily exploit.

"Tell me, father," Lev'Kanar said, raising a hand and trailing his fingers down one of Elise's cheeks. She moved her head away, an anxious look appearing on her face. "What compelled you to change your mind about remaining faithful to mother? You have essentially insulted her and disgraced the family you tried so hard to hold together by sleeping with a human."

Elise grabbed his hand, slapping it away from her face. Lev'Kanar gave a menacing gaze, a low growl building in his throat. Something snapped in Kal'Shayar upon hearing his son's comment. He raised the carbine and within seconds had put his aim over his son, but something in his head made him change his mind. Instead, he shifted his aim to the right a little and sent a shot straight into the fire extinguisher on the pillar ahead.

White smoke began to pour out of the extinguisher, spraying across the soldiers in front of Elise and Kal'Shayar. This served as all the distraction the elder Skirmisher needed as he turned around, facing the four soldiers who were standing behind them. He started shooting, cutting the four of them down before they had a chance to react, green streaks lancing from the barrel of his carbine before burning straight through the black-clad soldiers. Red blood spurted forth from each impact and the soldiers twitched and convulsed from the miniature explosions before they hit the ground.

Kal'Shayar turned around to face the soldiers now shrouded in white smoke. Lev'Kanar had grabbed Elise during the chaos but she struggled against his grip, breaking free from it and going to raise her

weapon. However, Lev'Kanar was faster and he sent a powerful right arm blow into her face, making her stumble before she fell into a stack of metal boxes. The pile collapsed around her, mostly burying her while Kal'Shayar looked on in shock. This shock was short-lived as he turned to face the other soldiers, going to fire his carbine but finding the weapon to be empty.

Rather than chance a reload, he dropped the weapon and charged forwards. He came to the nearest soldier, who was only just recovering from the smoke. Kal'Shayar punched the soldier across the face, causing him to stumble but quickly recover. He swung the butt-end of his rifle in the Skirmisher's direction, causing the Skirmisher to duck, before he yanked the human down into a hunched-over position with one hand. He then jumped up and quite literally rolled over the human's back, causing him to fall to all fours while the Skirmisher landed on his feet at the soldier's other side. With the soldier vulnerable, Kal'Shayar delivered a sharp kick to the man's ribs, hearing a few bones break in confirmation of the blow's power. The man screamed and the other soldiers started in Kal'Shayar's direction, giving the Skirmisher only seconds to react.

Kal'Shayar bent down and yanked the combat knife out of the sheath at the waist of the screaming soldier. He then brought it across the man's neck in a single fluid motion, slashing through the uniform and then through the flesh, cutting open the jugular veins and sending forth a messy spray of blood. Kal'Shayar stood upright as the soldier gargled and choked on his own blood. There were about six other soldiers all around him, the white smoke having since begun to fade. One of the soldiers, who was a woman judging by the lighter build and noticeable bulge at the chest section of the armoured uniform, had raised her shotgun. Kal'Shayar had little time to react and noticed that the others were standing a few metres clear of him so as to not get shot by her accidentally.

Spinning the knife around in his right hand, Kal'Shayar threw it at the woman. It became stuck in her right arm, causing her to yell and drop the gun. As she stumbled and went to pull it out, the other soldiers began to move closer to Kal'Shayar. He was surrounded on all sides while Lev'Kanar stood nearby, watching the whole thing but not lifting a finger to assist the soldiers. Instead, it looked as if he found the whole thing entertaining.

The first soldier raised an assault rifle, pulling the trigger. Kal'Shayar ducked under the cone of fire and pushed the weapon up before punching the soldier in the guts, causing him to take his finger off of the weapon's trigger. Kal'Shayar stood up again and spun the man around, throwing him into another of the soldiers. Both of them went falling backwards, dropping their guns while the other three lowered their weapons and pulled out their knives. These close quarters did not make using guns a truly viable option.

The woman with the knife stuck in her arm had since pulled it out, holding the bloodied blade in a threatening posture as she charged for Kal'Shayar's back. He heard her coming, even as he was trying to fight off one of the soldiers in front of him. He ducked and grabbed the soldier, grabbing his blade wielding hand and plunging it into the chest of the female soldier rushing to his back, piercing the armour and going straight through to her heart. The soldier holding the blade seemed surprised for a moment while the female soldier fell

backwards and landed on the floor, remaining motionless.

Kal'Shayar had two of the other black-clad soldiers come at him from both sides. One slashed forward with a combat knife, cutting on an unarmoured section of Kal'Shayar's arm. The pain was a brief, stinging one that reduced to a minor throbbing as dark purple blood began to ooze out of the gash. Kal'Shayar barely paid it attention as he punched the soldier in the chest, the armoured vest there absorbing much of the blow. He instead grabbed the soldier's blade wielding hand and twisted it, the bones breaking loudly while the soldier screamed. The one who Kal'Shayar had made to stab his comrade had put one hand to the holster at his waist in order to pull out his sidearm. Kal'Shayar ducked under one blow from one of the other soldiers before he lunged for the man going for the gun, hitting the ground and using both legs to sweep this mercenary's own out from underneath him.

Kal'Shayar grabbed the pistol the soldier had dropped, switching off its safety before firing a shot into him. There was a spray of blood as the bullet punched through the armour on his front and shattered into several sharp shards that blew out of his back violently, splattering blood across the cement floor behind him.

Kal'Shayar stood up and turned around to face the other four mercenaries as they began to surround him again. He raised the pistol and shot one down, the bullet blowing away an eye and exiting through the top of his head. One of the other three attacked him from his right, the man's blade scraping along his arm and causing him to drop the sidearm. The Skirmisher swivelled about where he stood to meet the soldier head on, watching as he slashed at him with the blade again. Kal'Shayar jumped backwards to avoid the blow, aware that the soldier behind him was about to stab him in the back.

He turned around and deflected the incoming blow, sending the knife flying out of the soldier's grip. He then grabbed the man's arm with one hand while planting a leg between his two, tripping him up before spinning his arm so that the soldier landed flat on his back with a loud thump! His arm had been broken and was twisted at an awkward angle at the elbow but Kal'Shayar did not give the human time to scream and instead brought a foot down onto the mercenary's neck with considerable force, crushing his windpipe and causing him to quite literally choke on his own Adam's apple.

There were two more of the soldiers, both of which were standing back now that they were aware of Kal'Shayar's fighting abilities. He took a moment to catch his breath, aware that his son was watching from several metres away, his hands behind his back.

Kal'Shayar dived for the floor, catching the two soldiers off-guard as he picked up the pistol he had dropped seconds earlier. Rolling back onto his feet, he fired and sent two rounds into one of the enemy mercenaries, both going through the chest. The last few bullets in the magazine went into the last soldier, one hitting him in the throat. He went down quickly, blood spurting out of the neck wound with each heartbeat (though there were not many more of those once he hit the floor).

Kal'Shayar dropped the empty pistol and turned around to face his son who wore an unnerving smile on his face.

"Good to see you can still fight," Lev'Kanar said, somewhat mockingly. "I would have thought your years of complacency would have affected your fighting skills."

Lev'Kanar walked forwards while Kal'Shayar stood his ground, his gaze briefly flitting over to where Elise was buried underneath the metal boxes. He feared for her wellbeing but there was little he could do for her now. Once this was over he would check on her and pray to whatever higher power was out there that she was still alive.

"How do you want to do this?" Kal'Shayar asked. He could feel the pain from the gashes he had received, on both his chest and his right arm, and that pain was now starting to get worse. Once the adrenaline started flowing again it was likely it would fade.

There was a table by a nearby set of scaffolding, one that Lev'Kanar approached while Kal'Shayar watched. He picked a long and curved piece of metal off of it, the human tool known as a 'crowbar'.

"I have learned many things since I left home, father," he said. "You would always defeat me in our sparring matches, but that will have changed." He turned around, the crowbar in one hand as he started to walk towards his father. He took on a ready posture, holding the tool threateningly in one hand.

"It is not a fair fight if you have a weapon and I do not," Kal'Shayar commented.

"Then take one for yourself," Lev'Kanar said. "There are plenty lying around."

He lunged at Kal'Shayar that instant, bringing the crowbar down swiftly in an overhead motion. Kal'Shayar side-stepped the attack and went to deliver a few quick blows into the ribs of the younger Skirmisher but Lev'Kanar turned around in anticipation of this. He deflected the first of the punches with the crowbar, painfully smacking his father's arms away.

Kal'Shayar took a few steps backwards, his arms throbbing painfully. Lev'Kanar moved towards him with startling speed, bringing the crowbar around in a wide swing from the left. Kal'Shayar rolled underneath it, coming close to the scaffolding. Using his Skirmisher agility, he grabbed the scaffolding and quickly started climbing up while Lev'Kanar watched. His father hurriedly scrambled onto the top-most platform, wounds aching as he went. From this vantage point Kal'Shayar could see right across the vast warehouse-like expanse. Lev'Kanar was looking up at him, the Skirmisher version of a smile along his snout.

"Come down, father," Lev'Kanar taunted. "I would very much like to keep this fight on the ground."

There were a few tools lying up on the platform. Kal'Shayar found a sturdy metal hammer amongst them. It was not much, but it would have to do and it was the only decent tool amongst them. The others were motley narrow screwdrivers, along with one electric drill.

"Do I have to climb up after you, father?" Lev'Kanar asked.

Kal'Shayar saw the beams that ran below the ceiling, along with the pylons that extended from them diagonally before connecting to the rafters up above. He jumped for the nearest horizontal beam, wrapping his arms around the metal and scrambling on top of it. Lev'Kanar had started up the scaffolding, scaling it quickly and easily before he arrived on the top platform. Kal'Shayar watched him from where he was crouched on a nearby horizontal beam, unsure of where to go next. He could not just run away, not when Elise was here.

"Are you afraid, father?" Lev'Kanar asked. He jumped from the platform and onto the beam, landing right on top of it and keeping his balance perfectly. He had considerably better coordination compared to Kal'Shayar when it came to jumping and climbing.

Lev'Kanar started along the beam, moving around the connecting pylons. Kal'Shayar stood his ground, standing up and balancing himself along the metal beam in order to meet his son head-on. Lev'Kanar came up to him, swinging his crowbar past his head. Kal'Shayar deflected the blow with his hammer, twisting the tool such so that it fell out of his son's grip. Lev'Kanar was not easily countered and ducked underneath his father's follow-up swing before rising and punching the elder Skirmisher in the chest. Kal'Shayar stumbled and felt himself mere seconds from falling so in his desperation he reached out and grabbed Lev'Kanar by the collar, taking him with him.

There was a brief moment of freefall as Kal'Shayar stepped off of the beam, dragging his son along with him. The pair scuffled in mid-air before rolling each other sideways in such a way that they hit the platform below them at the same time. The landing was painful, knocking the wind out of both of them before the scaffolding underneath gave way and the metal supports broke. The whole thing came crashing down with the two of them amongst it, wooden planks and metal poles falling around the pair. Kal'Shayar landed flat on his chest, metal poles smacking him in the back as they fell upon him, further exacerbating the pain that was reverberating across his body from the fall. Something had broken in his chest, presumably a few ribs but he nonetheless stood up amongst the cloud of dust that had collected around the fallen scaffolding. His back hurt considerably, as did his legs and his chest. Cuts and scrapes along with a few bruises were scattered over his form, his shoulder wound from the day before erupting with a searing pain once again. He looked around for his son, finding Lev'Kanar standing a short distance away, covered with dust and with a few cuts and bruises of his own. He had a piece of metal ramrod sticking out of the lower part of his stomach, dark purple blood flowing out of the wound it had caused and soaking the metal. Lev'Kanar did not hesitate to pull it out, barely uttering a sound as he did so. He threw the short piece of ramrod aside and started towards his father again, his expression one of anger.

Lev'Kanar's shoulders tensed, if only briefly, as he delivered a flurry of punches towards his father. Kal'Shayar stepped backwards as he deflected them each in turn, countering one by grabbing the arm before delivering a blow of his own into his son's stomach. Lev'Kanar broke free from his grip and stumbled, his hand going around a wooden plank before he brought it up and swung, sending it straight across his father's face.

Kal'Shayar's head was wracked with pain, the muscles across it tenderizing as the wooden plank snapped in half and splinters of wood cut into his face, drawing blood. He took a few steps backwards, aware that a few of his teeth had fallen out and had landed upon his tongue. He spat them out, along with a sizeable helping of his own blood. With his head now throbbing painfully and his vision going blurry, Kal'Shayar suddenly found it very difficult to block any further attacks. His son came at him again with his bare hands, punching him in the gut before putting his arms around him and bending over. He threw Kal'Shayar right over his back, sending him into an agonizing landing on the piles of wooden planks and metal poles behind him.

Kal'Shayar felt heavier than before, a sure sign of fatigue and his injuries starting to get the better of him. He began to rise to his feet just as Lev'Kanar walked towards him again. Kal'Shayar kicked his son in the shins and then sat up, grabbing the younger Skirmisher around the waist before throwing him onto the floor.

He set upon his son quickly, pounding him across the face with a few powerful punches. Lev'Kanar threw him off and returned the favour, holding him down with one hand before sending one punch after another into his father's face. This went on for a few minutes, with one getting the better of the other for a moment, delivering blows before being thrown to the side. After a while, weariness got the better of them. Kal'Shayar found his way to a spot a short distance from Lev'Kanar where he sat against the wall and remained like that, watching as his son remained lying amongst the wrecked scaffolding. Neither of them had the energy to continue fighting the other.

Kal'Shayar looked to where Elise was. She was still buried beneath the boxes, presumably unconscious. He sure hoped she was that way and not actually dead. He then glanced over to Lev'Kanar, who had risen back onto his feet and grabbed a short metal pole. He walked over to the elder Skirmisher, looking down at him with a bruised and cut complexion.

"I cannot bring myself to kill you, father," Lev'Kanar croaked, wiping purple blood away from his mouth.

"Nor can I kill you." Kal'Shayar hated having such doubts, but Lev'Kanar was the only other surviving member of their family. He could not kill him, no matter how hard he tried to convince himself that it had to be done.

Lev'Kanar brought the pole down quickly, knocking Kal'Shayar out cold. At least the older Skirmisher could take some relief in the fact that he could not feel the pain of his injuries anymore, although as he fell unconscious he could not help but worry over what his son had planned for him and for Elise, for that matter.

## 25. Dinner

\*\*Dinner\*\*

February 15th, 2558

Kal'Shayar woke up sore all over, lying on his side in a fairly

comfortable bed. The injuries he had received from the fight earlier ached, his head being the worst culprit as the pain up there was enough to cause him to groan out loud as he put a hand to his face. His gaze went to the room around him, finding it to be fairly bland in terms of decoration, mostly grey and beige in colour. There was a desk in the corner and a doorway that lead into a small adjoining bathroom, with a wardrobe against the wall near the foot of the bed. A drink dispenser was on the opposite wall. The whole room was very much like his quarters on the Vanguard, right down to the same colour scheme. He realized then that he was on board a ship, as his sensitive hearing was able to detect the quiet hum of the engines as it travelled through space. They were in transit to somewhere, as for where he had no idea. Who had brought him here? His son? If so, why? He had gotten the impression that Lev'Kanar had wanted him dead. They had almost killed each other back in the compound on Earth, after all.

He became aware of someone else in the room with him. Rolling onto his back, he saw that Elise was standing by the bed, a concerned look on her face. He sat up slowly and she put a hand to his shoulder, leaning towards him. She was in a clean unmarked uniform while Kal'Shayar found that he had been stripped to his undergarments, his wounds having been tended to. Elise took up a grey jacket and leggings from the end of the bed, much like what Lev'Kanar had been wearing, and then handed them to the Skirmisher.

"Where are we?" Kal'Shayar climbed out of the bed, his head throbbing dully.

"A UNSC destroyer, the Saratoga," Elise replied. "You might want to take it easy, you were pretty beaten up." She had a small bandage over a gash on her forehead but was otherwise no worse for wear.

Kal'Shayar slipped into the supplied outfit, noticing that he looked remarkably like his son in terms of the way he dressed. He wondered what had become of Lev'Kanar, as it was likely he was responsible for why he was here now. Elise watched him carefully, trying to determine just how well he was feeling. He appreciated her concern but he had been more seriously wounded in the past. He felt fine, despite the soreness.

"You need not worry too much," he said, moving his gaze towards her. "I will be fine. What about you?"

"I got knocked on the head, but that's about it." Elise paused while Kal'Shayar closed the distance between them, putting a hand to her cheek. He moved his fingers over the small bandage that was covering up the gash on her forehead, able to see that it was nothing serious.

He looked around, trying to determine what to do next. His gaze went to the door but Elise noticed this and shook her head.

"It's locked," she said. "Trust me, I've tried it already."

They were prisoners, then. Did that mean Lev'Kanar was on board? Maybe even General Caine? It was certainly likely. How long would they have to wait before someone came by? There would have been a good reason for why Lev'Kanar was keeping them alive. Caine would no

doubt want them both dead, as they were threats to his plans. Maybe Lev'Kanar had changed his mind about killing his father? Kal'Shayar knew that even he had difficulty working up the courage to kill his own son.

"What do we do?" Elise asked.

"We wait." Kal'Shayar sat himself back down on the bed. He noticed the rather annoyed look that crossed Elise's face momentarily and smiled, though he was unsure whether she would see it as such. "What would you suggest we do? There is nowhere for us to go. Even if we somehow escape from this room, there will be most likely many guards outside. We are on a ship, one that could very well be in transit through slip-space. There would be nowhere for us to go if we managed to get out of here."

"I don't like sitting around, waiting for something to happen," Elise said.

"How long have you been awake?"

"Two hours."

Kal'Shayar could understand Elise's frustration. Their lives were in the hands of others. They could march in here and gun them both down if they so chose and there would be little either of them could do about it. Elise sat down next to him and he put an arm around her, letting her rest her head on his shoulder. She clearly appreciated the close comfort, despite their physical differences. He wondered what might become of this relationship they had, if they survived their current circumstances. He had told her he would stay with her, regardless of what happened, but it was unlikely they would be able to get by on any human world. Even if they got rid of Caine, they may still be listed as fugitives. They would need to expose what the man had been planning somehow in order to clear their names. There was a good chance the Kig-Yar government on Sauem would take them both under protection, but this would require a great deal of strings being pulled and favours being called in. Elise would never fit in on a Kig-Yar world anyway. He did not want to force her into such a situation.

They sat together for a few minutes, saying little. Kal'Shayar was quick to rise when he saw and heard the door slide open, surprised to see a female Skirmisher standing in the doorway. Elise remained sitting while Kal'Shayar took a few steps towards the door, only for two black uniformed human soldiers to appear behind the female. He remained still, unsure of what to make of the female.

"Kal'Shayar, it is a pleasure to finally meet you," the female said. She was a few inches shorter than him, dressed in a set of bluish-grey robes that denoted her as a Shipmistress. This was more or less the equivalent to the human rank of 'Captain'. Most Skirmisher females lacked plumage and instead had an array of pointed spines along the top and back of their heads which could be moved about in a variety of different manners. These movements would in turn tell others what they were feeling at the moment. Kal'Shayar did admit to himself that he did find her attractive, seeing that she was young but very well-built for a female, with sinewy muscles and striking blue eyes. However, his heart was with Elise, as odd as it may have seemed.

"Who are you?" Kal'Shayar asked. The female smiled, giving a slight bow in response.

"My name is Lir'Vak," she answered. "I work with your son."

Kal'Shayar nodded. Elise had made her way over, having stopped to his left. She regarded the female Skirmisher with a discerning gaze, a bit confused as to why someone like her would be here.

"By 'work', do you mean you help him with his terrorist activities?" Kal'Shayar narrowed his eyes at her. There was a flash of annoyance on her face but it was quickly replaced with a friendlier expression, as if she was under orders to be as welcoming as possible to the pair.

"He hasn't told you, has he?" Lir'Vak gave the Skirmisher version of a grin, showing the sharp teeth that were towards the end of her snout. "Lev'Kanar has grand ambitions for the future and wishes to protect our race. Surely you don't consider that 'criminal'?"

"The end does not justify the means."

"If you must kill a thousand to save a million, surely you would see that it does indeed justify it?"

Kal'Shayar said nothing to this. He did not wish to debate such things with this woman and much preferred to find out just why he and Elise were being kept here. Lir'Vak's gaze had gone towards Elise and Kal'Shayar could detect a hint of disgust in her voice as she spoke, although her expression was one of warmth (though this was clearly just for show).

"Is this the human female that has stolen Kal's heart?" She sounded unimpressed. "Lev'Kanar told me all about you, right down to your obvious tryst with his father. You may not be able to sense it, but his scent is all over you."

"I haven't had much of a chance to shower," Elise said as she frowned at her.

Lir'Vak returned her gaze to Kal'Shayar.

"You could do a lot better than a human," she said, a somewhat more seductive tone to her voice. "Your bloodline is a strong one. There are probably many Kig-Yar females willing to mate with you."

"Is that why I detect my son's scent all over you, Lir'Vak?"

There was a flash of annoyance across her face at the comment but it was gone quickly. Instead, she motioned to the two guards behind her and they stepped forwards, one grabbing Kal'Shayar and the other going for Elise. They were escorted out into the corridor, followed by the female Skirmisher. Both remained silent as they were taken through the ship, being pushed up a flight of stairs that took them to the next deck. It was here they found their intended destination which lay behind a set of metal double doors marked 'OFFICER'S HALL'.

One thing Kal'Shayar noticed was the amount of black-uniformed soldiers, all part of General Caine's private force. There were a few standard ship personnel scattered about, but otherwise the actual contingent of soldiers on board were all comprised of Caine's people. This made it all the more likely that the General was on board.

The Officer's Hall was just that: a fairly large room with a long rectangular table in the centre, vinyl covered chairs linings its sides. There were a few paintings on the walls of the room, along with a UNSC flag suspended from the ceiling at the far end. A pair of armed guards stood at either end of while Lev'Kanar, dressed in his usual grey jacket outfit, sat in a chair on one side of the table's end. That part of the table had three other places set, complete with very human plates and cutlery. Most of the food currently laid out along the table's middle was Kig-Yar, mingled with some human cuisine.

Lev'Kanar looked towards his father, a smile crossing his snout as he gestured to the chairs across the table from him.

"Father, Commander McGillon, please, sit down."

Kal'Shayar did not know what to make of this and so treaded carefully, gradually making his way to a seat across the table from his son. He sat down in the well-padded chair while Elise seated herself to his left. Lir'Vak sat down on Lev'Kanar's right and immediately set to work on the food on offer, shovelling a great chunk of a meat from a native animal of Eayn onto her plate.

Kal'Shayar regarded the food laid out in front of them and was reminded of how he had had nothing to eat since the day before. He knew he was taking a chance, eating food offered by the enemy, but if he was going to try and escape he would need the energy. Besides, it was clear his son did not intend to kill him just yet. He might even want to explain a few things and information was one thing Kal'Shayar wanted in regards to his son and Caine.

Elise looked at some of the alien food with uncertainty and opted for a helping of the decidedly human Caesar salad, shovelling a reasonable helping of it onto her plate.

"General Caine did not wish to join us for dinner," Lev'Kanar said, almost remorsefully. "He said that it was best we kill the both of you, but I persuaded him otherwise. You could help us, father. I even kept your human playmate alive for you, if only to show you I am not as heartless as you think I am." He smiled as he said this and Elise felt the urge to lunge forwards in an attempt to punch the living daylights out of the younger Skirmisher. Kal'Shayar stayed her hand with one of his own, putting it on her thigh under the table and squeezing it gently to let her know that any physical altercations here would probably end badly.

Kal'Shayar then took for himself a helping of one of the meats on offer. He used the human cutlery by his plate to cut it up before shovelling a few of the pieces into his mouth.

"I have a few of my own people on board who were able to help prepare this dinner," Lev'Kanar continued. "I understand that neither of you have eaten anything for some time? That is no surprise, considering what the both of you have been through. Part of me even feels sorry for putting both of you through all of that, almost killing you on

more than one occasion."

"You can end this," Kal'Shayar said. It was worth a try to talk some sense into his son, especially since it was clear that he wanted to listen. "Kill the General and we can all go home. Put this life of terrorism behind you. We can make amends, maybe-"

"Maybe what?" Lev'Kanar scoffed. "I have made up my mind, father. I have only the interests of our species at heart. You want to make amends now, after everything that has happened? You made me who I am. You always used to tell me that it was our duty, as warriors, to protect our people. That is what I am doing."

"By killing innocents?"

"No one is innocent."

"That is not true. You are helping a madman start war..."

"That will benefit our race," Lev'Kanar interrupted.

"That will destroy two others," Kal'Shayar added.

"Both of which are a threat to our own."

"You would incite a conflict that could kill millions, all through some misguided belief that it would benefit \_us\_?"

"It will benefit us. You wait and see, father."

Kal'Shayar fell silent. It appeared that there was no getting through to him. Then why was he here? Why was he still alive? It was likely Caine would order him and Elise killed if Lev'Kanar did not win him over. It was sorely unlikely that anything his son could say would make him change his mind about him. The two of them were completely rigid in their beliefs, with neither willing to pay attention to what the other was saying. It was an impasse, of sorts. Lir'Vak sat listening to the whole exchange with noticeable interest. Lev'Kanar was still calm and composed while Kal'Shayar could feel a growing feeling of frustration building within him.

"I could have saved Jeril," Lev'Kanar said. "Your stubbornness killed her. I want to show you what I mean, father. There is a place I found, on a Sangheili colony world, a place left behind by the ancient Forerunners. It contained technology capable of altering one's DNA, the very building blocks for life."

"What are you talking about?" Kal'Shayar frowned, realizing that he might finally be getting some straight answers. "You found a Forerunner ruin?"

"Not a ruin. A whole functioning facility. The Sangheili on the world had stumbled across it but have done little with it, as now that world is a combat ground for a war between Covenant loyalists and the so-called 'reformists'. I claimed it for myself and utilized the technology within to enhance the abilities of some of my followers."

Kal'Shayar said nothing and simply kept listening. Perhaps, if Lev'Kanar had told him about this when he had offered to save Jeril,

something may have been done.

"Most of those enhanced are now in cryogenic stasis," Lev'Kanar said. "The process they were put through did enhance them but it also destroyed their minds."

"And you would have put your sister through this process?"

"It would have been better than leaving her to die to an accursed disease."

Kal'Shayar shook his head. It was clear to him that his son was completely misguided. First there was his willingness to kill innocents and then there was his apparent loyalty to their species and determination to see them to a better future, a commendable line of thinking for sure, but Lev'Kanar's methods in achieving his ends were certainly morally questionable. Now there was this business about the Forerunner technology 'enhancing' people. It was almost too much to take in and for a moment Kal'Shayar thought that his son might have been lying or was simply insane.

"It would have left her without a mind, according to what you have told me," Kal'Shayar said. "Death is the better option."

"Not all those who go through the process are destroyed by it." Lev'Kanar smiled again and it took Kal'Shayar a moment to realize what his son was implying. "I went through it myself, if only partially. My physical abilities were not changed much, but I have been blessed with somewhat heightened mental abilities. I can sense what you're feeling quite clearly."

"I can sense your indecision from in here, father." Kal'Shayar remembered this, hearing it from his son while he had been in the cell underneath the UNSC headquarters in Sydney. It had been an odd statement to make at the time but now it made sense. He wondered just to what extent this 'process' had altered his son's mind, as it was clear he was not quite himself. Lev'Kanar had always been rebellious but now he seemed more than that. He seemed unhinged.

"Such abilities are not as helpful as you might think. I only went through a small part of the process, so I did not receive the full benefit of what the Forerunners had to offer. If I had, I would have most likely ended up like the others, with my mind effectively destroyed. I could have saved Jeril by putting her through a similar process, maybe even prevent the side effects. Now we will never know." Lev'Kanar sounded genuinely remorseful. Kal'Shayar did not appreciate this, as he had always felt that his son had not cared enough about their family to even feel remorse about them. It was all a show his son was playing and one that the elder Skirmisher remained unconvinced by.

"You left the family years ago," Kal'Shayar said. "You may be my son, but that does not mean I need to like you. The things you have done, no matter how you justify them, are still wrong. What of these Kig-Yar you have in cryogenic suspension? What does this have to do with General Caine?"

"Caine wishes to utilize the Forerunner technology for his own soldiers. It may in fact work, as the process seems more receptive to a human body than a Kig-Yar one. However, between you and me, father,

I intend to be rid of the General soon enough." Lev'Kanar smiled at the thought. "He is a dangerous man, with much ambition. Get rid of him and with the UNSC Security Council destroyed, the humans will be disorganized for some time. The Sangheili will certainly engage them in open conflict. As for who will win the ensuing war, that is very much open for debate. The humans have a distinct edge over the Sangheili, and us for that matter. They have been studying Forerunner and Covenant technology for years. They have not been afraid to reverse-engineer it for their own ends, unlike the laws imposed upon us by the Prophets that forbade any sort of manipulation of Forerunner technology. It was a poor decision by them and one that has put us behind the humans in terms of technology. This very vessel we are on, the Saratoga, named for the place where a series of decisive battles in a long ago conflict in human history occurred, is fitted with shields and energy weapons derived from Forerunner technology. It is a match for any Covenant vessel. It even has a slip-space drive capable of travelling as fast as any Covenant ship. The humans have achieved all of this in the space of only a few years. And what of the Sangheili? Of the Kig-Yar?" Lev'Kanar paused and shook his head. "We are stuck with technology we know not how to maintain. Only the Prophets and their selected ministers knew these things and they are gone. Given time, and the technology we have relied upon for centuries will fall into disrepair. We have stagnated, father. That is not a good thing, especially when the humans continue to advance beyond us."

Kal'Shayar listened carefully but otherwise kept silent. His son did make a few valid points about technology, but that did not justify the murders he had committed. Elise was now prodding at her food with a fork, apparently not all that interested in eating it anymore. Kal'Shayar took a few more pieces of meat into his mouth, chewing slowly while he pondered what had been said. It may have been possible to save his daughter, but whatever pain he felt for not taking the chance was overshadowed by his distrust of his son and the determination he felt in trying to stop him. Lev'Kanar was dangerous, this much had been proven, but Kal'Shayar found himself in no position to stop him. Not like this, on a ship full of enemy soldiers. They still had to deal with Caine as well.

"What does your friend think?" Kal'Shayar asked, nodding towards Lir'Vak. She had been quiet during the meal and looked surprised when Kal'Shayar mentioned her. "Does she follow the same beliefs you do? About ensuring a 'future' for our species? I suppose this Forerunner technology you have is supposed to benefit us?"

"Lir'Vak is an associate of mine," Lev'Kanar replied, turning his head to look at the female. They exchanged smiles and it was obvious to Kal'Shayar the extent of their actual relationship. Apparently Lev'Kanar had gotten over the detail of his family some time ago. "She has been the one who helped me gain loyal followers, often recruiting those who share the same outlook on the galaxy as I do. She used to be a Shipmistress, with her own privateering vessel, but it was destroyed in a Sangheili raid."

"You appear to have gotten over the loss of your previous mate and children," Kal'Shayar asked. "I thought that may have been part of why you hated humans?"

"I do not hate humans," Lev'Kanar said. "The death of my mate and children was the result of a group of humans simply following orders.

It is the people who were giving those orders I have a problem with. The Security Council has already been taken care of, and as for Sergeant Nevas..." He paused, thinking about this for a moment. "I do not know what has become of her. She was freed by the Spartan back on Earth. As much as I would have liked to kill her, I feel that would not have given me as much satisfaction as I believed it would. When the war begins and humanity begins to fall apart, I suppose I will gain some satisfaction leaving her to watch it all happen." He paused, eyeing his father carefully. "I still wish to know, father. What compelled you to take a human as a mate?"

It was a question straight out of left-field that caught Kal'Shayar off-guard. It did make him think, if only for a moment, why he had found himself falling for Elise. However, these things were not easily explained. He felt for her and she returned those feelings. It was simple as that.

"Is it really any of your concern?" Kal'Shayar asked.

"Do you care for her? I thought you might have. If not, I can order her killed..."

"You're a sick bastard," Elise snapped, interrupting the younger Skirmisher. "It's like you get a kick out of fucking with your dad. What the hell is wrong with you?" She had been keeping her anger contained fairly well until now. She was giving Lev'Kanar a death glare, as if she wanted to reach over and break his neck. She probably would have attempted to do just this were it not for the armed guards and the fact that Kal'Shayar had put a hand to her shoulder, staying her hand once again.

Lev'Kanar frowned at her and then slowly shook his head.

"I would be nothing without my father," he said calmly. "We would I wish to torment him? I am not that spiteful, Elise. You do not mind if I call you Elise, do you?"

"This might be entertaining for you and all, but we'll stop you. This much I'll make sure of."

Lev'Kanar returned his gaze towards his father.

"I do not wish to kill you," he said. "I gave it some thought, after our fight. I thought that it might be better if you were to see things my way. I told you all you need to know. We will be arriving at the Sangheili colony world in about two weeks time, perhaps a bit sooner on the advanced slip-space engine. I will keep you both alive, for now, despite Caine's reservations. He would prefer it if you were both dead."

"I'm not surprised," Elise interjected.

"Regardless, enjoy your dinner. You will be free to roam the unrestricted areas of the ship, including this deck and the one where your quarters are located. Do not think of yourselves as 'prisoners'. Instead, you are 'guests'."

"We're still stuck aboard this ship with the likes of you," Elise said dryly.

"There is an airlock a few rooms away, if you wish to leave," Lev'Kanar replied, partially showing his sharp teeth in a Skirmisher grin. Lir'Vak seemed to find his little joke amusing and chuckled.

"I wish to show you what I have been talking about, father," Lev'Kanar said. "That is all. Maybe win your approval, though I know that would be next to impossible with you. I never could impress you, could I, father?" He sounded annoyed. The elder Skirmisher thought of replying to this, to tell his son why he had been such a hard father but he decided not to. It was the sort of thing that had been talked to death between him and his son, even before Lev'Kanar had left home.

Kal'Shayar was not looking forward to the next two weeks, but there was some comfort to be found in the fact that he would have Elise with him. She appeared to be thinking the same thing, judging from the way she had turned to face him, a somewhat concerned expression on her face. He put a hand under the table finding one of her own where it rested on her thigh. They clasped hands covertly, even if the extent of their relationship was known by the two people sitting across from them.

Two weeks gave them plenty of time to plan an escape, if that would even be possible from on board this ship. If Lev'Kanar wanted to show them what he was trying to do with this Forerunner technology they would not interfere. It would give Kal'Shayar and Elise an opportunity to work out a means of stopping him and Caine.

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><p>Leon did not like being on board Covenant ships. They brought back many memories, none of them very good. He had taken part in raids on Covenant ships and ground depots and had become somewhat familiar with the purple-blue metallic architecture such places had. He had lost friends on those missions, often having watched the deaths occur. As such, he was wary as he was escorted down the corridor by a pair of crimson-armoured Sangheili soldiers. It was not in a hostile manner, they were simply there to ensure he got to where he needed to be. He was still reeling from the death of Valerie and had already sworn to himself that he would kill Caine for what had happened, and this was on top of his intended revenge against Lev'Kanar for crippling him months ago. This thirst for vengeance was really the only reason he chose to work with these Sangheili at all.</p>

Rel Valum awaited him in a briefing room of sorts, one that was large with several metal chairs (ones large enough to fit a Sangheili on) lined up in rows. There were blue holographic displays along the far wall and the sides while Rel Valum himself, outfitted in purple-blue Field Marshall armour, sat in a chair by the main screen. There was a table in front of him, one where Jerashar Wittron occupied a chair across from the Field Marshall. Both Sangheili looked up as Leon was escorted into the room though the Spartan did little to return their gazes.

The ship they were on was a Covenant-built stealth vessel, very small in size (even smaller than a typical UNSC destroyer). It was fitted with camouflaging systems that, while not perfect, had allowed it to get close enough to Earth to launch the raid on the compound where

Valerie had been held captive. Leon had been told about the ship by one of the Sangheili Majors he had met upon arriving. It was the only one of its kind and the camouflaging technology was sophisticated, yet unreliable, which meant that it was unlikely the same technology would be applied to any larger vessels. They had entered slip-space several hours ago and Leon had chosen to remain aboard, hoping to convince Rel Valum that pursuing Caine and Lev'Kanar would be worthwhile. The Field Marshall had not needed much convincing.

"Lieutenant," Rel said as Leon approached. The Spartan sat down in a vacant chair across from the Field Marshall. The two Sangheili who had been escorting him walked to the back of the room and stood guard by the door. "The Major and I were just discussing how best to approach the problem that is General Caine. If he intends to ignite war between our two species, he has very much succeeded. It will take some doing, but I believe that if we can find him and evidence of the treachery against your government he has committed, we will be able to clear up the matter. However, it will not be easy."

>Leon had little to add. As Valerie had helped him to open up, her death had closed him right down again. The pain in his back was worse than it had been for a while and his right hand would sometimes involuntarily shake, a problem that he had thought he had been rid of judging from the lack of it for the past week or so. He felt like how he had been during his stay in that hospital on Reach, wasting away with only Valerie as decent company. Now she was gone, so he did not even have that luxury. Still, if what he had heard was true than both Elise and Kal'Shayar had been taken captive by Caine and Lev'Kanar. He felt that it was his obligation to save them. They were his friends, after all. Being friends with a Skirmisher was something he had not thought possible until recently.<p>

"General Caine's vessel is ahead of us by several hours and is capable of slightly faster slip-space speeds," Rel continued. "It is near impossible to judge where they are going until they near their destination. We will keep in pursuit, but we will need a plan if we are to catch up to them."

"Isn't it obvious?" Leon looked towards the Field Marshall as he said this, his gaze set in stone. "Disable the ship and board it. I'll find Caine and Lev'Kanar and I'll deal with the two of them accordingly."

"That ship you are referring to is far larger and more heavily armed than this stealth vessel," Rel countered. "Disabling it could get us destroyed. Reinforcements could take days, if not weeks, to intercept with us. Your government is not willing to help, as they see you as a fugitive. Our options are limited, and as much as I would like to prevent unnecessary war between our species, that war is almost inevitable unless we can act quickly."

"It could be weeks before they arrive at their destination." Leon rose out of the chair, annoyed at the indecision. "We should remain in pursuit. Instead of trying to come up with some plan now, why don't we just wait and see where they go?"

"They could detect us if the stealth systems malfunction, which is likely," Rel said. He did not sound particularly faithful towards the success of the pursuit. "What would you have us do then? We could be very easily destroyed."

"You were able to get by Earth's defences..."

"We were there because we wished to keep track of the Major," Rel said. "The fact that the stealth systems lasted as long as they did is almost miraculous. Now you are bringing us into a fight we have little chance of winning."

Leon considered their options. All he wanted to do was get after that ship and get the General and Lev'Kanar, but he was stuck on this ship with these very doubtful Sangheili and it looked like it would remain that way for a while.

"Like I said, we should just keep in pursuit."

"That we will. If they arrive somewhere, I may be able to organize a proper strike-force but they could take weeks to arrive. You will have to be patient, Lieutenant."

Leon had no interest in being patient. Once they found out where Caine's ship was going, he would make sure to get straight after it regardless of whether the Sangheili would help him or not.

## 26. Decided Heart

\*\*Decided Heart\*\*

March 7th, 2558

Kal'Shayar had gotten comfortable on board the Saratoga, though he had learned to be wary whenever he roamed the corridors. He was in enemy territory, but his son had made it clear that he and Elise were to be treated as guests rather than prisoners. The two were convinced that they would meet a grisly end at the ship's destination, a fact that had spurred on the pair to spend much of their quality time together in their shared quarters. Kal'Shayar had been at a loss on what kind of escape they might pull, instead preferring to wait until they had reached their destination despite the risks that entailed. When that happened, he would have a good idea as to what they might be able to do, even if that equated to stealing an escape pod and taking their chances on the surface of an alien planet.

As for the nights spent on board, Kal'Shayar and Elise had ensured to make the most of their time together. At this hour of the morning, the pair lay naked and intertwined in the small bunk. Kal'Shayar sat against the wall while Elise leaned against his chest, using one hand to trace lazy circles along the Skirmisher's muscular chest. This had become a routine of sorts. There had been doubts at first, including the feeling that Kal'Shayar thought they might be watched through hidden surveillance cameras. It was unlikely Caine and Lev'Kanar would leave them alone together in a room without some sort of spying going on.

It might go some way to explaining the strange looks some of the other Kig-Yar on board gave him when he strolled through the corridors. It was not something he was too concerned with and it was clear that his son had ordered his Kig-Yar followers to leave the two of them alone. The last two weeks had given Kal'Shayar plenty of time to think and to conduct research. He would sometimes find one of the

younger Kig-Yar on board and attempt to get friendly with them, loosening them up so they might answer the questions he had. From what he had gathered, Lev'Kanar had the loyalty of all of his Kig-Yar mercenaries. They all believed in what they were doing, that it may achieve the superiority of their race and secure its future. The healthy pay-checks they received for their services did not hurt, either.

Kal'Shayar glanced at the digital clock display on one of the computers set into the wall. It was getting close to the usual ship-wide 'wake up' time. Every morning at the same time Lev'Kanar would walk into the room and tell the two of them to join him for breakfast. He had caught the pair in the act a few times, though he had seemed amused and not directly bothered by it. Kal'Shayar had made sure since then that he and Elise were quite finished by the time morning rolled around.

It was odd, to have such freedom on board yet still be prisoners. It was clear that Lev'Kanar respected him enough to have persuaded Caine to allow all this. It was also clear that his son had plans for the two of them, for him in particular. The thought was enough to make him slightly uneasy but he told himself that whatever his son had planned, he would find some way to stop it. Though past attempts at stopping his son's actions had failed miserably, a fact that did cast some doubt over future prospects. They certainly had not been able to save the Security Council, after all.

Elise rolled off of him at that point, sliding her legs off of the bed before she stood up and stretched her arms, flexing her shoulders a bit before she glanced back at where he sat.

"Where are you going?" Kal'Shayar asked. He took in her well-muscled but athletic form before him, all soft curves and smooth skin. She had started to get dressed, beginning with the undergarments that the Skirmisher had so carelessly thrown off of her the night before. She still carried some visible scratches along her back and thighs but they were superficial and did not seem to bother her.

"It's almost time for breakfast, remember?" Elise fixed the clasp on her bra and turned to look at him, her well-proportioned breasts now fitted snugly within the black sports bra. "I'd rather be fully dressed when Lev barges in like he always does."

Kal'Shayar nodded. He could feel something different about this morning and it took him a moment to realize that the ship was no longer travelling through slip-space. A slip-space trip in a ship like this gave the background hum a slightly different tone. That was gone, replaced with a quieter and more standard engine hum. This clearly meant that they were close to their intended destination, something that made the weary Skirmisher a bit anxious.

He climbed off of the bed, finding his clothes piled up underneath it. He took his time getting dressed, slipping on the grey coat provided by his son before walking over to the drink dispenser at the far end of the room. The humans had a decent variety of drinks on offer and he found himself going for one called 'apple juice'. The dispenser filled a reasonably sized glass with a sharing of the drink and he took it up in one hand and began to sip while watching Elise fit on her plain grey uniform jacket. It was not much of a 'uniform' though, lacking any rank insignia. She had no authority here and was

virtually a prisoner, as he was.

"I think today might prove to be interesting," he said. Elise turned to look at him, raising an eyebrow in a curious manner.

"What makes you say that?"

As if on cue, the door of the room slid open. Lev'Kanar stood in the doorway, dressed in his usual grey armoured coat. He stepped inside and regarded the two of them with a careful gaze, a hint of anticipation crossing his features.

"Good morning father," he said, his gaze going towards Kal'Shayar. He then glanced at Elise. "And to you, Elise."

"Breakfast time again, is it?" Elise asked.

"Not quite." Two guards in black uniforms appeared on either side of him, following him through the doorway. "We are going to be travelling down to a planet this morning."

"A planet?" Kal'Shayar had been right about them being at their destination. This only added to his uncertainty but he remained calm and collected. He found his son's friendliness a tad unnerving but it was likely their fight back on Earth had made Lev'Kanar rediscover the respect he had once held for his father. Kal'Shayar felt oddly proud of him: Lev'Kanar was an excellent fighter and planner and had clearly taken everything his father had taught him to heart, even more so than Kal'Shayar himself had.

"The Sangheili call it 'Decided Heart'," Lev'Kanar replied. "We will be having breakfast on board a Pelican drop-ship while we are flown to a base on the surface. There, I can show you everything I told you about, father." He looked towards Kal'Shayar with noticeable satisfaction. "Maybe then you might understand why I do what I do."

"I understand why, Lev," Kal'Shayar said sternly. "It still disappoints me greatly. All of your abilities are wasted on terrorist activities. You could put them to much better use."

"We have spoken about this, father." Lev'Kanar's gaze narrowed into a frown. "We always reach the same impasse. I apparently inherited my stubbornness from you."

Kal'Shayar said nothing in response. It was true, what the younger Skirmisher said: they were both so sure of what they believed in that neither could convince the other. It struck Kal'Shayar then that maybe this was what was threatening him and Elise, for that matter. Lev'Kanar would try to talk him into helping him one last time once they arrived at the base on the surface. If he could not convince him then he would probably kill him, along with Elise. He had no fear of death but to know that he might be responsible for Elise's death...He knew what had to be done if that was what was at stake.

"Your stubbornness is more reminiscent of your mother," Kal'Shayar said after a lengthy pause.

"It does not matter. Come, father. Same to you, Elise." He gestured towards the two of them to follow. The two guards on his sides walked

forward, one going behind Elise while the other took position behind Kal'Shayar. They pushed them from behind, coaxing them into walking forwards. Rather than start any trouble, Kal'Shayar and Elise simply fell into step behind Lev'Kanar as he walked out of the room, leading them into the corridor beyond. Kal'Shayar had the sinking feeling that today would be a very long day.

\* \* \*

><p>Decided Heart was a mostly barren world, with tropical regions along the equator. Kal'Shayar sat in the back of a Pelican and Elise sat to his left while Lev'Kanar had situated himself across from the two of them, Lir'Vak at his side. There were several Kig-Yar soldiers also seated in the passenger area, keeping watch on the two 'prisoners' while the Pelican zoomed high above the desert landscape below. The trip down to the planet had been fairly uneventful, though Lev'Kanar had ordered the rear hatch open once they had gotten fairly low. They were only a few hundred metres above ground now, flying across the rocky deserts with the wind buffeting the open rear ramp. Lev'Kanar seemed very interested in the landscape sweeping past below them and he made sure to point out anything of interest, including a Sangheili settlement they flew by.<p>

Kal'Shayar had only vaguely heard of the colony world. The Sangheili had founded it centuries before, a planet that sat on the border of their interstellar empire. According to the records, there had been stories of a 'paradise' planet much like the Sangheili home-world, Sanghelios. These stories had been told by Kig-Yar traders enough times to enough of the Sangheili for some to start believing it, going out to search for this potential colony world. Something had gone wrong at some point, as the flotilla of ships carrying the colonists had instead stumbled across this barren rock of a planet years after leaving their home-world. With supplies running low, the Sangheili had decided to take their chances in the barren deserts, settling in the tropical regions along the equator. Times had been tough during the early years of the colony but over the centuries it had become a bustling cultural hub for the species, only to fall into disrepair during the Human-Covenant War. Kal'Shayar was not certain on the details, but he did know that a major human strike had levelled one of the major settlements. Now the planet was in a state of war while Covenant loyalists fought against the new reformists for control of the planet. Neither side would give in to the other and the fighting had been going on for about two years, with very little outside assistance coming in. The Sangheili on Sanghelios and the colonies close to it had their own problems and trying to crush a rebellion on one of their outlying colonies was not high on their list of priorities.

The sound of battle could be heard from down below as they skirted over the outskirts of the city. The buildings here were old, less the hybrid of metal that was seen on most former Covenant worlds and more of old-fashioned stone masonry. There were purple-metal towers in the centre of the city, erected during the heyday of the Covenant. It was surrounded by far shorter stone and wooden structures and alien tropical foliage had been planted in reserves scattered throughout the city. Plumes of smoke rose from burning structures while plasma weapons fire was exchanged down in the streets. A few searing blue-white balls of plasma, fired from mortars, soared high over the rooftops before crashing to the ground in great plumes of white flame. The Pelican was mostly ignored, though a few streaks of plasma

fire zipped by as the Sangheili ground forces took pot-shots at the speeding aircraft.

"This planet is a warzone," Lev'Kanar said, his gaze going towards his father. "The perfect testing ground for my enhanced warriors."

"You said they were all in cryogenic suspension?" Kal'Shayar noticed the look of glee on his son's face. It was unnerving to see him so excited at the prospect of warfare. Clearly, not all of his teachings had gotten through to his son. If they had, they were warped and barely reminiscent of the original ideas.

"Most are, with good reason as I explained," Lev'Kanar answered. "Many have had their minds destroyed by the process, reducing them to bloodthirsty animals. Those that still retain some semblance of proper thought are let loose in the city against the Sangheili. We try to gauge their abilities and so far they have proven quite effective. Those that we released managed to wreak much havoc before finally being put down by the Sangheili. Neither side knows of our operation and they are too concerned with fighting each other to really attempt a full investigation."

"You are taking advantage of a civil war just to further your own goals," Kal'Shayar said through gritted teeth. "How can you sleep at night?"

"I sleep very well," Lev'Kanar replied. "I know what I am doing is for the betterment of our species. Most of the deaths incurred by this operation are all Sangheili deaths. I am not bothered by those."

Kal'Shayar had nothing to add. He returned his gaze to the landscape below, watching as the Pelican left the city behind them and headed further into the desert. The heat was even more pronounced up here, warm air billowing into the Pelican's rear as they zoomed over the desert sands. There was an oasis in the distance, the pool of glistening blue water visible through the green foliage that surrounded it. Sand dunes continued on for as far as the eye could see. Mountains were against the horizon and mesas jutted from the flatter sections of desert that lay for miles ahead. The sun was a glowing yellow orb up high, its light reflecting off of the desert sands and in turn making the whole landscape look even brighter.

The Pelican dipped into a valley where rocky and steep ridges prevented any easy climb up its sides. At the end of the valley, sitting on a cliff over it sat a fortress. It looked to be very old, made out of sand coloured stone bricks while carrying the distinctive curves and domes of Sangheili architecture. The Pelican rose over the large fortress before it slowed down and hovered above a large open courtyard. Pieces of the fortress, such as fragments of stone, littered the area. The Pelican descended upon the courtyard and set down gently. Immediately the Kig-Yar soldiers filed out, spreading out across the courtyard before Lev'Kanar and Lir'Vak calmly exited the craft.

Kal'Shayar rose out of his seat, taking Elise's hand into his own before the two of them stepped down the Pelican's rear ramp and onto the sandstone floor of the courtyard. The fortress was certainly large but also very rundown, the windows boarded and parts of the

walls falling apart. Kal'Shayar could see that some repair work had been started and dozens of metal crates were stacked up against the wall ahead while scaffolding had been set up along some of the more broken sections. There were guards on patrol throughout the compound, most of them Kig-Yar and no doubt part of Lev'Kanar's private force.

"They built this place on top of Forerunner ruins," Lev'Kanar said as he turned to face his father. "They wanted to protect them, as well as honour them. This is not just a fortress, but a place of worship. It was deserted about a century ago following an incident involving a Sangheili Zealot who had taken it upon himself to attempt to exploit the technology contained within the ruins. He was a rebellious sort but became angered when none of the technology below worked the way he wanted it to. By this point, a few less heretical officers had become aware of his intentions and had sought him out." He paused for a moment in the telling of this story, clearly passionate about the subject. The fascination on his face was telling. It was not just fascination Kal'Shayar saw on his son's features, but obsession.

"There was a long fight as the Zealot had barricaded himself in the ruins, complete with supplies to ensure he would be able to hold out for days. Finally the loyal officers and their soldiers broke through the Zealot's defences but had lost scores of their own. The Zealot, rather than give up the ruins and the secrets they may have contained, instead set off a series of explosives that caved in the whole place. He was buried down there and he died down there while the Sangheili docked his name from their records and decided to leave the ruins alone, being the superstitious types they are. They thought the place was cursed, containing secrets that could drive a man mad. The Sangheili have always been superstitious fools, but I was able to use this to my advantage. I found out about the ruins from a Sangheili trader who happened to be the grandson of the Zealot in question. When I found out what the technology inside could do, I knew exactly what I was to do." He gestured to his father to follow.

Kal'Shayar was not sure what to think of the story, though it made an odd sort of sense that the Sangheili would pull out of this place after something like that happened. Of all the Covenant species, they had been the ones to revere the Forerunners the most. They took the beliefs surrounding that extinct race and its technology very seriously. If they believed that such technology had driven one of their own Zealots mad, then that was what would be put into the official story. The fact that they had done their best to remove all traces of the incident from their records only proved how serious they considered it. He could not help but think that there was some truth behind the 'madness' the technology within the ruins caused: not only were those Kig-Yar who had been subjected to the 'process' turned insane, but some of that insanity had seeped into Lev'Kanar.

"Nice story," Elise said drily. "I suppose you're going to tell us this Zealot's ghost wanders the fortress at night?" She was not convinced of the truthfulness behind the history of the fortress. Lev'Kanar only smiled in response, as did Lir'Vak.

"Maybe it does?" Lev'Kanar said.

Elise rolled her eyes and glanced at Kal'Shayar.

"I think we would be better off playing along," he said to her quietly. Elise nodded in agreement, but carried a trace of reluctance in her gaze as well. She probably wanted nothing more than to escape, though Kal'Shayar knew any attempt at escape now would probably end badly.

Lev'Kanar lead the group out of the courtyard, taking them to a wide lane that ran along one of the fortress' perimeter walls. There was a guarded steel door built into the ageing masonry of the large building on the other side of the lane. Lev'Kanar stopped before it and the two Kig-Yar guards there stepped aside for him. He pressed his hand to a control pad by the door, tapping in a short code before the door slid open. Behind it was the musty old interior of the fortress' central building but at the end of the large room was another steel door, one that lead down a flight of old stairs. Sunlight flitted through the boards on the windows, the rays piercing across the room like blades.

Lev'Kanar took the group through the dusty room. There was assorted junk scattered about here, including some old furniture. A few wicker baskets were stacked in one corner, next to a bunch of large wooden chairs that were covered with dust.

The stairs beyond the second steel door continued underground for some time before coming to a wide cavern. Excavation equipment was scattered about the place, having been used to dig out the entrance to the ruins below. The Forerunner architecture was easy to spot, starting at the end of the cavern and continuing even deeper underground. Kal'Shayar had seen a few Forerunner structures in his time so he recognized the geometric patterns and shapes that comprised such structures, all of it constructed out of some kind of metal/stone hybrid material. There were lights stuck along the walls while the Forerunner ruins themselves had an illumination of their own. It was clear that this cavern was only the tip of something far larger.

"The Zealot's remains are around the corner there," Lev'Kanar said, pointing to the far end of the cave to where a narrower tunnel branched off. "If you have doubts about the history of this place, the proof is all there."

There were guards on patrol down here, among them a few of Caine's black-uniformed soldiers. There was one that Kal'Shayar recognized, though not right away: Colonel Paul Green, the one who had been on the original 'team' before Caine had revealed his true intentions.

"Where is General Caine?" Kal'Shayar asked, curious as to why the General had not been on the Pelican with them.

"He has a few things to attend to," Lev'Kanar answered, turning around to face his father. "He has his own compound by an oasis not far from here. He leaves much of the work here for me to do, though I am sure he will capitalize on the technology down here eventually." He walked forwards, closing the distance between the two of them.

He then nodded towards Colonel Green who stood nearby and was busy conversing with one of the other human soldiers.

"He sent that man down here, that Colonel, to keep an eye on me," Lev'Kanar whispered, so only his father could hear. "The General does not trust me. He knows I plan to betray him and I know he plans to betray me. It is a very delicate working relationship we have." He smiled as he said this.

Kal'Shayar nodded in acknowledgement. He had nothing to say to this, though he thought it strange that his son would willingly put himself in such a dangerous position. If their positions were reversed, Kal'Shayar would never have aligned himself with the renegade General. However, it was clear that the General's help had accelerated Lev'Kanar's plans greatly.

"How did you meet the General?" Kal'Shayar asked, curious. "I doubt you just stumbled across him by accident."

"His soldiers captured me, after the day I was presumed dead," Lev'Kanar explained. "They interrogated me and when they found out of the following I had gained, Caine himself offered me a deal. We would help each other, as we shared similar interests. The discovery of the existence of these ruins occurred shortly afterwards."

"Caine's had been planning this for that long?" Elise sounded incredulous. "That's crazy."

"Granted, our plans have changed over time and have been adapted for changes in circumstance," Lev'Kanar added. "The capture of the military AI was when we finally started to carry them out. Bringing you all together on the team was the next phase after that. There is a reason you were specifically chosen for the team, father." His son looked at him, his expression one of satisfaction. "Because of our connection. I thought you might be persuaded to join me."

"That will not happen," Kal'Shayar said, rather bluntly at that.

Lev'Kanar motioned to them to follow and that they did, heading through the entrance of the ancient Forerunner facility. The corridor went deeper underground but was brightly illuminated by lights set into the floors and ceiling. It took them into a very large, open room with curved pillars at the corners and a set of three pod shaped structures in the centre. There were computer terminals here as well, some of them Forerunner in nature but a few of the others were human in build and had been hooked up to the Forerunner computers by thick black cables. There were technicians here, about three of them in grey coveralls. They were human and were no doubt in charge of working the computers here. There were several guards scattered around, some Kig-Yar and some human. All watched as the group entered though none stared for too long.

The three pods were over two metres tall and two wide. There were transparent glass sections over half of their length and visible lines of white energy travelled through them. Lev'Kanar stopped by one of them, giving an almost proud look as he regarded the pod.

"This is where the process is carried out," he said. "The recipient is set inside one of the pods and the computers do the rest. It took some doing to get it to respond properly to Kig-Yar physiology and a

great deal more experiments are needed if we are to perfect the process."

"You said you had soldiers in cryogenic suspension?" Kal'Shayar asked.

Lev'Kanar gestured for him to follow. Lir'Vak eyed the pair with noticeable dislike as they followed them across the room and into an adjoining room. The door here was rather large and wide, pentagonal in shape with two small windows by its centre. It slid open and took them through a rather cold and narrow corridor before they came to another door. Lev'Kanar tapped a few buttons on a holographic panel by the door which caused it to slide open. There was a brief rush of cold air as a cloud of white frost spilled forth. The room beyond was large and freezing cold. It was a dead-end though it was filled with cryogenic stasis pods, all of them hooked up to a set of computers by one wall. The pods were of the standard human build, their glass covers mostly frosted over. As a result, there was little that could be seen through them though Kal'Shayar did approach the nearest one to take a look. He could make out the faint outline of a Skirmisher inside, a male from what little he could see.

"We converted this room into cold storage," Lev'Kanar said. "There are about thirty-three Kig-Yar frozen in here, twenty-four of them common and the rest Skirmishers like ourselves."

"What do you intend to do with them?" Kal'Shayar asked as he stood up. He turned to face his son, who was giving a rather nonchalant look.

"We will find some use for them," he answered. "Perhaps, when we have perfected the process, we could fix their unfortunate conditions. At the moment, if we were to release any of them, they would probably attempt to rip out our spines."

"Did they agree to be put through this 'process'?" Elise asked, getting the Skirmisher's attention. Lir'Vak shot her an annoyed gaze and was the one to reply to her question.

"They knew exactly what they were getting into," she snapped. "Remember this, human: You're only still alive because of your connection to Kal'Shayar. If it were not for that, we would have executed you by now. Learn your place and keep your mouth shut unless spoken to."

Elise's face screwed up into an expression of anger.

"Don't you talk to me like that, you bitch," she said, taking a few steps towards the female Skirmisher. Lir'Vak stood her ground and Kal'Shayar was quick to grab Elise by the shoulder, forcing her to stop in her tracks.

"Now is not the time," Kal'Shayar said quietly into her ear. Elise was clearly the most upset with their current situation but nonetheless she heeded Kal'Shayar's words, backing down and relaxing where she stood. Lir'Vak had a smug look on her face, her blue eyes watching the human carefully.

"These people volunteered," Lev'Kanar explained, unbothered by the brief altercation. "They knew of the risks and of the potential

rewards."

"Why do I find myself not believing you?" Kal'Shayar sensed some indication that maybe his son was not telling him the complete truth. Lev'Kanar only frowned in response to what his father was implying and took a few steps towards him so that they stood about a metre apart.

"I am not as ruthless as you think I am," he said simply. He pointed in the direction of the door. "How about we leave here, as it is getting terribly cold?"

Kal'Shayar could only agree with this, each breath he took releasing a small cloud of white frost. He and Elise followed Lev'Kanar and Lir'Vak out of the cold storage room and back into the main laboratory. They stopped here when Lev'Kanar turned around to face his father again.

"Do you see the work we are doing here, father?" He asked. "Do you not understand what I am trying to do?"

"You are experimenting on fellow Kig-Yar." Kal'Shayar found the whole thing abhorrent. He had seen many things during the war, some of which continued to haunt his nightmares to this day, but the fact that his own son had not only become a terrorist but was also experimenting on his own followers only cemented the disgust he felt towards him. Lev'Kanar may have been his son but that did not mean he had to like what he did. He might have felt some strange sense of pride over his son's accomplishments, but some of the accomplishments themselves disgusted him.

"They gave themselves for the cause..."

"What cause?" Kal'Shayar had been keeping himself as calm as possible for the last two weeks, using other outlets to release whatever tension had been building up. Elise had helped with this immeasurably but unfortunately seeing this whole operation in person had only helped this tension to reach a critical point. "Revenge? Is that what this is all about? Humans killed your family, now you want to get them back?"

"I am helping our race..."

"How so? By reducing those 'blessed' with this 'process' into mindless killing machines?" Kal'Shayar's voice had taken on a hostile tone, cutting a swath through the air between them. "You are not helping anyone but yourself. Admit it, Lev. You are in this for yourself. No one else."

"Again with the stubbornness, father," Lev'Kanar said carefully. He did appear to look slightly fazed, his composure having faltered by a small margin. He had not been expecting his father to lash out as he just had. Since their fight two weeks ago, things between them had been mostly civil. That fight in the compound on Earth had exhausted all of the anger they had felt towards one another. Now it had simply bottled up again inside Kal'Shayar over the last two weeks, threatening to turn their current conversation into something violent.

"What would you have done with Jeril?" Kal'Shayar asked. "You might

have cured her, but you could have destroyed her mind."

"She could have lived..."

"Lived as a mere shadow of what she once was?"

"She was already one."

"She at least had her mind intact." Kal'Shayar regarded the lab around them with a wide-eyed gaze. He was just so fed up, everything had been building up to this point. Everyone in the room was looking at him and his son, listening to the pair argue and probably pass judgement on him. The humans probably thought he was crazy and the Kig-Yar, who were all part of Lev'Kanar's little following, probably thought he was too stupid to understand why they had gone on their little crusade. His gaze fell back onto his son who now stood rigid, as if confused as to what he should do next. For the first time in a while, Lev'Kanar was truly at a loss. All his attempts to convince his father to join his mission had failed.

"I thought you might see it my way..."

"You were wrong," Kal'Shayar said. He stepped towards his son, crossing the distance between them with surprising speed. Immediately several of the nearby guards raised their weapons, all of the barrels pointed his way while he stared into the eyes of his only son.

"I thought I might have been able to make you see things my way," Kal'Shayar said.

"You were wrong."

"Again, we are at an impasse." Kal'Shayar heard a few of the guards approaching and turned around, quick to react to their arrival. There were two Kig-Yar close to him now, mere inches away with submachine guns raised. He grabbed both by the throats, slamming their heads together with considerable force. They fell to the floor like ragdolls, both unconscious. He was aware now that he had crossed a line when every other guard, humans and Kig-Yar alike, moved in to surround him.

"You can kill me, father," Lev'Kanar said from behind him. "But you will be overwhelmed and my plans will continue. I have created an idea, a potential future for our species. You can kill me, but you cannot kill that future. You cannot destroy what I have started here."

"I can try." Kal'Shayar knew what had to be done now. This whole place had to be destroyed. It was the only way to make sure that this would not continue.

Two of the guards grabbed Elise from behind. She began to struggle and shout, enough for Kal'Shayar to turn around and lunge for one of the guards holding her. He struck the human guard across the face with an elbow, breaking his nose. The cartilage gave a rather sickening crunch sound as the blow connected and the human yelped in pain, letting go of Elise as he fell backwards and hit the floor with a dull thump.

Kal'Shayar was set upon by several guards at that point, each one

proceeding to beat him into submission with either metal batons or the stocks of their weapons. He fell down under the weight of the blows, surrounded on all sides with little he could do as each blow sent waves of pain through his body. One of the blows caught him on the face, loosening a few teeth and making him fall flat onto the floor while the taste of his own blood filled his mouth. The blows ceased after about a minute, his body bruised and bloodied, his muscles and bones wracked with pain. His son stepped forwards, looking down upon him with contempt. His beaten father rose to his knees, his body aching all over as his son grabbed him by the collar and looked him dead in the eyes. There was a burning rage contained with his son's eyes now, betraying whatever calmness he may have been portraying earlier.

"Perhaps you will see things my way when you are put through the process yourself," Lev'Kanar said, his voice laced with venom. Elise was shouting now as guards grabbed her and forced her onto her knees. One of them kicked her in the ribs, winding her and sending her onto the floor as she coughed and spluttered. Kal'Shayar would have rushed to her aid at any other time but now his attention was focused solely upon his son.

"And your human playmate can watch it all happen," Lev'Kanar said. "I truly wished you might have been convinced to join our cause, but I should have known better."

Kal'Shayar said nothing, his gaze going over to where Elise lay on all fours, only just recovering from her beating. He wanted to reach out and tell her that all would be right, that there was still hope. However, that would have been a lie to not only her but to himself.

## 27. Crash

\*\*Crash\*\*

March 7th, 2558

It was not a particularly enjoyable experience, being stuck on board a Sangheili stealth ship. The ship itself was not very big, with far more cramped corridors and rooms than any human vessel Leon had been on. The crew was about forty-five strong and was enough to make the ship feel crowded. Leon spent most of his time on board by himself, only coming out of his quarters to get something to eat and occasionally speak with either Jerashar or Rel.

His room was small and came with an adjoining toilet cubicle. The colour scheme was mostly greys and blues, complete with the sleek curves that all Covenant-built ships seemed to have. The last two weeks or so had been fairly uninteresting. The only thing he had to look forward to was getting to General Caine and Lev'Kanar, though he had no idea how that would work out. He intended to kill the both of them but that would probably require going through a whole lot of their soldiers first. Those two were headed for some Sangheili colony world and the stealth ship was in pursuit. That pursuit had been going on for over two weeks, both ships traversing the eeriness of slip-space. Rel had already told Leon that it was unlikely they would be able to actually intercept them before they reached their destination and that it would take weeks for reinforcements to

arrive. The Sangheili Field Marshall had told Leon a few times that they would have to wait before striking whatever stronghold Caine and Lev'Kanar had set up on the planet they were headed for. Rel did not seem keen on risking an assault, something that was understandable considering the limited firepower the stealth ship had as well as the small crew. Even so, Leon was determined to find some way to get off of the ship.

He was still dressed in his grey uniform, though he had given it a few washes during the journey. Lying back on the firm bunk bed, Leon became aware of the sound of an alarm siren. It was a deep and drawn out warble that had begun sounding off throughout the ship. He sat up suddenly and alert, quick to survey his surroundings. There was nothing out of the ordinary in his room. Nonetheless, he climbed off of the bed and recovered the pistol he had stowed under the mattress. Jerashar had been kind enough to return the weapon after he had had it confiscated when they had found him at the compound back on Earth. Leon had protested against being unarmed on board a Sangheili ship but Rel had not listened, a fact that had not surprised the Spartan in the slightest. Jerashar, on the other hand, had given him back his sidearm but had told him not to tell Rel. It would be their little secret and Leon had had no problem with this as he had doubted he would need to use the weapon on board. Unfortunately, it seemed he might have to now, if the alarm siren was anything to go by.

He was the only human on board from what he could tell. Most of the other Sangheili here did not pay him much attention, save for Jerashar and a few of his friends. They had asked him questions and tried to strike up conversation but Leon had limited his responses, if only because he had things on his mind that were distracting him greatly. Among them was Valerie's death, an occurrence that had left him feeling empty all over again. He had felt much the same way in the hospital back on Reach for some months. Valerie had filled that emptiness, but now that she was gone he realized that he no longer had anything left to lose. Caine had wronged him greatly, as had Lev'Kanar. He would kill both if he could, but it was Caine who had gained the most interest from him now. Lev'Kanar may have crippled him and taunted him while doing it, but Caine had betrayed him and almost destroyed the UNSC's leadership. The man wanted another war and had to be stopped. Leon would give him a war, just not the one he had been hoping for.

Leon checked his pistol, ensuring that it was loaded and that a bullet sat within the chamber. Satisfied with what he found, he carefully made his way towards the door. It was locked on his side as an added security measure but this was easily disengaged by tapping a few keys on the holographic panel set into the wall nearby. With the lock disengaged, Leon took a step back as the door slid open. The corridor behind it was dimly illuminated by pulsating blue lights that were spaced along the corridor's ceiling at intervals. The siren ceased at that moment but the lights kept pulsing, indicating that whatever alert was in place had not ended.

He leaned past the doorway and took a careful glance down either end of the corridor. The pulsing blue lights did make it slightly difficult to get a proper view through the darkness but from what he could see, nothing was out of the ordinary. He assumed that perhaps the ship was in the middle of some sort of drill but it was at that point he realized they were out of slip-space.

The ship's engines sounded different in and out of slip-space. He had grown accustomed to the sound on board the stealth ship as they had cruised through slip-space, traversing the vast interstellar distances quickly by essentially taking a 'shortcut' through the outside dimensions that existed parallel to the normal one the universe existed in. Physics worked differently in this 'void'. A ship could cover light years in a matter of hours or days, depending on the sophistication of the slip-space drive at work. Longer trips such as from Earth out to the farthest chartered frontiers could take weeks, even months.

Leon was thankful he did not need to spend too long on board the ship. He had a distrust of the Sangheili, especially types like Rel who carried a rather 'superior' attitude. It was clear to Leon, from the interactions he had had with Rel over the past weeks, that the Field Marshall did not think very highly of him. Leon sometimes sensed trepidation from the Field Marshall and was half-expecting him to call the Spartan 'Demon', as that term had become popularized by the Sangheili during the war when referring to the Spartans. Leon had no love for Rel either but he knew better than to start trouble with him, as he was practically a guest on board his ship. Rel could order his men to throw him out of an airlock and he would be well within his rights doing so.

The cause of the current state of alert was yet to be discovered by Leon. He made his way down the corridor, heading past a few of the nearby rooms. No Sangheili were in this corridor, though he knew the rooms near his were populated by some crew members. He had the feeling he may just be reacting to a standard drill on the ship, one that was a means of keeping the crew alert. He would not put such a thing past Rel. The one thing that troubled him the most was the fact that they were no longer in slip-space. From what he could feel from the ship's engines, they were travelling along at a minimal speed.

The door at the end of the corridor slid open up ahead. Three humans appeared in the doorway, all three outfitted in the black combat gear of General Caine's First Reaction Battalion. Leon froze in place for a moment, considering his options in the few seconds it took for the three humans to see him and recognize him. Two of the trio were armed with submachine guns and the third carried a shotgun, standard fare for boarding a ship. The close quarters on board a ship like this made such weapons very effective.

Leon crouched down in the middle of the corridor, aware of how exposed he was. The three FRB soldiers made their intentions clear when they raised their weapons, though they did not fire. Instead, the one with the shotgun who was clearly the ranking officer, took a step forwards and looked straight at Leon. He kept his shotgun held at the ready while Leon kept his pistol trained on the man, his finger hovering over the trigger.

"Spartan A-079," the man called towards him, his voice stern, "You are trapped. This ship is full of our soldiers and none of the Elites on board will help you."

"You want me to give up?" Leon asked. He was surprised to hear the soldier talk, as he had assumed Caine would have ordered them to shoot first before asking any questions.

"The General ordered us to take you alive, if possible," the soldier replied.

Leon remained still, his eyes fixed down the sights of his weapon. Caine probably wanted to explain himself, as he was yet to have a proper opportunity to do so.

"He said he can clear your name," the soldier continued. "We were sent here to get you, to determine whether taking you alive would be worth the trouble. What will it be, Lieutenant? Will you come with us, without incident?"

Leon wondered what had become of the Sangheili. It seemed almost convenient how none were here, leaving him alone with these humans. His distrust of Rel might have been well-placed, as he got the feeling that he had been left out to dry. There was no real incentive for him to give himself up, other than getting an opportunity to get close to the General. He would rather do that on his own terms, rather than what the General and his soldiers dictated to him. There was also no guarantee they would not just execute him if he did give himself up. If they did want him dead, they may have blown up the ship but the fact they had not implied that the Sangheili on board were probably involved in this set-up. There were simply too many possibilities and Leon had no idea what to think, so he decided to go by what he did know: he knew not to trust the General and certainly not his soldiers.

"No." Leon stated this rather bluntly before he squeezed the trigger on his pistol, sending a bullet straight into the head of the shotgun-wielding mercenary. He took a few steps backwards before falling, his visor smashed while blood trickled down his face. The other two soldiers immediately opened fire, their submachine guns spraying a withering hail of bullets down the corridor. Leon had little room to move and so rolled into the doorway of one of the adjoining rooms, pressing himself against the locked door as to provide a smaller target to the mercenaries.

He leaned around the side and returned fire, emptying the remaining rounds loaded in his pistol. One of the FRB soldiers fell, hitting the side wall before falling into a heap on the floor with a pair of bloodied holes blown through his chest. The other soldier ducked and continued to fire, each round pounding into the metal wall near Leon. His M7 submachine gun, a standard-issue UNSC model, abruptly clicked on empty after a few seconds of fire. The soldier began to hastily reload and back away at the same time, the man perhaps realizing that he was in a bit of a difficult situation.

Leon strode out of the doorway, his pistol empty. Instead of trying for a quick reload, he instead started to run towards the soldier who was clearly beginning to panic. The soldier in question fumbled the magazine, causing it to fall from his left hand and hit the floor with a soft clink! Leon threw his empty pistol at the soldier, hitting him in the chest. He stumbled in surprise, almost dropping his submachine gun in the process.

Leon came to the dead soldier who had fallen with a bullet in his brain. Running along, he dived ahead and planted both hands onto the dead mercenary's shotgun before tucking his head in and rolling back onto his feet. He levelled the shotgun at the remaining soldier and pulled the trigger before his opponent had an opportunity to react.

The shotgun firing was almost deafening within the confines of the corridor but it was nothing the Spartan could not handle. The soldier was hit squarely in the chest by all of the buckshot. It punched through the armour he wore with relative ease, sending him flying backwards as spurts of blood erupted forth from each impact. The mercenary hit the metal bulkhead behind him with considerable force before he was unceremoniously plunked onto the floor, blood pooling around him.

Leon paused for a moment, making sure no more of Caine's mercenaries came rushing in. Once he was satisfied that he was relatively safe, he bent down by the first soldier's corpse and stripped him of what shotgun ammunition he was carrying. Stowing the shells into his own pockets, Leon slipped a new one into his shotgun and then pulled back onto the pump. The shotgun was a typical UNSC model capable of holding six shells at the most and Leon estimated he had scavenged about twenty from the fallen soldier. This should be more than enough to face whatever else he might encounter on board the ship.

The bulkhead door opened after some fiddling with the control panel set into the wall by it. Having been on the ship for over two weeks, Leon knew his way around. He decided he would head for the command centre that was situated towards the front of the ship as he may be able to find some answers there. If that failed, he would take an escape pod and hope he had better luck with whatever planet happened to be nearby.

The ship, being as small as it was, meant that the command centre was not a very long walk away. Leon found himself going by the mess hall, discovering several dead Sangheili lying in the corridor outside. Several of Caine's soldiers were scattered about the mess hall, sifting through the corpses of more dead Sangheili. Bullet holes and plasma burn marks were upon the floors and walls, indicating that a shootout had occurred here. The soldiers in the mess hall were not immediately aware of Leon's presence, allowing the Spartan to duck around the doorway as he considered his options. If there was a window on this ship, he may have been able to get some idea of what was going on. However, Covenant ships lacked such simple things and were considered to be nothing more than structural weaknesses. Was there a ship docked with them right now? It was likely, but he had no way to be certain unless he checked the main airlocks or found a computer terminal that could give him the information. He had little understanding of Covenant-built computers and even less understanding of the Sangheili language.

The command centre was past the mess hall and a deck below. Leon had memorized the ship's layout during his first day on board. This deck contained most of the living quarters and the mess hall, along with a few recreational facilities. The deck below was where the command centre, briefing area and armoury was located. Below that would be the engineering level. Judging from the dead Sangheili nearby, it appeared that the crew had been taken by surprise.

Leon made his way past the mess hall, keeping out of sight of the soldiers within. Going through another bulkhead, he found his way to one of the ship's elevators and took it to the lower deck. There were a few more dead Sangheili officers in the corridor outside the elevator, their bodies riddled with bullets. The Spartan worked his way towards the command centre, deciding to cut through the briefing area as it would provide a more direct route.

The briefing and operations room was where he had had his first proper talk with Rel Valum during his first day on board the ship. It had not changed since then, save for the two humans in black combat gear who were standing at the end of the room.

Both saw the Spartan enter and immediately started shooting. Leon ducked behind a row of chairs as the bullets pounded into them, tearing holes through the metal and causing some rounds to ricochet around him, a few flying dangerously close by. Firing guns inside a ship like this was not quite a good idea, as ricochets could result in the shooter or any of his allies getting injured. However, Leon had little choice in the matter and so hit the floor as the chairs in front of him were ripped to pieces by the withering hail of submachine gun rounds. One of the soldiers stopped to reload, crouching behind the large metal desk at the far end of the room.

Leon stood up and let fly with one shotgun blast after another. The buckshot tore into the table and desk at the end of the room, causing one of the soldiers to crouch to the floor as pellets sent sparks flying from the wall behind him. With both mercenaries on the ropes, Leon started down the aisle that ran down the middle of the rows of chairs. He strode confidently through the open, quick to react as the soldier behind the desk rose up partially in an attempt to return fire. Leon had the faster reflexes and sent buckshot flying into the soldier's face. Part of his head exploded from the force of the pellets, blood splattering across the desk and wall behind it.

The shotgun empty, Leon paused and pulled a shell out of one of the pockets on the front of his uniform. In one fluid motion he had slid it into the shotgun belly, pulling the pump on the weapon before the other mercenary could rise to his feet and start shooting. Leon blasted the soldier down as he rose from behind the table ahead, sending him flying into the wall behind him before he fell and ceased moving.

Leon began reloading the shotgun again, sliding in one shell after another as he made his way across the room and towards the door behind the desk. It opened as he approached, allowing him entrance to the narrow corridor behind it. From somewhere nearby, he could hear voices and footsteps. There was no doubt in his mind that the soldiers were trying to find him now, alerted to the fact that he had gunned down about five of their buddies.

The corridor he was walking through took him straight to the command centre, albeit through a locked and secure door. It took a moment of fiddling with the control pad by the door to get it to unlock. Once it opened, he was greeted with a view of the command centre in all of its glory. Most Covenant-built ships had vast command centres built deep into the ship, but the small size of this stealth vessel had ensured that the command centre was of more modest dimensions. Blue and yellow holographic screens lined the walls, including a pair of large ones at the end of the room which provided a detailed status display of the ship's systems and what was detected in the space around it. Currently there was a human cruiser floating nearby, no doubt belonging to General Caine.

Rel Valum was here, held at gunpoint by two mercenaries. Leon slowly stepped into the room, raising his shotgun as his gaze went towards

the Field Marshall. The mercenaries had their guns pointed at the Sangheili and stood a few metres from him, ready to fire at a moment's notice. There were two more of them standing at the other side of the room, watching the Field Marshall closely. Leon considered his options, knowing then that Rel was not actually the cause of his current predicament. Somehow these mercenaries had gotten on board and had gained control of the ship with clear intentions to finish off the Field Marshall.

Leon decided to shoot them all down, if only to simplify matters. He might then be able to get some answers from Rel. None of the mercenaries had noticed his entrance yet, though Rel glanced towards him, his expression neutral. It was at that point that Leon became aware of someone standing behind him and he felt the firing end of a plasma rifle pressed into his lower back.

"Drop the weapon."

He recognized the voice: it was Jerashar. With a great deal of reluctance, he dropped his weapon. The shotgun clanked loudly onto the metal floor, landing a short distance away. Slowly, he turned around, coming face-to-face with the young Sangheili. It was confusing, to say the least: of all the Sangheili on board, Leon would never have guessed that Jerashar was in league with the General. It did not even make sense, considering that Jerashar had been held captive and beaten in the compound back on Earth. Why would he suddenly decide to help Caine?

"You're part of this?" Leon tried to keep a straight face but some amount of his disbelief crossed his features. "But..."

"They have my family, Lieutenant," Jerashar interrupted. "My wife and son. General Caine wants this stealth vessel and unless I deliver it to him, my wife and child will be killed. I cannot allow that."

"But on Earth..."

"That was when Caine told me, when he took me captive," Jerashar said. There was a heavy tone of regret in his voice. "Handing over this vessel to the humans will put both sides on equal footing in the coming war. If doing this ensures the safety of my family, so be it."

"They won't be much safer when the war starts..."

Rel spoke up at this point, his deep and guttural voice laced with anger.

"You traitorous whelp!" He roared, taking a step towards Jerashar. However, the two soldiers watching him stepped into his path, their weapons raised. Rel looked like he was about to rip them to pieces but seemed to reconsider, instead electing to stand his ground whilst glaring angrily at Jerashar. "You would betray us..."

"Is family not the most important thing?" Jerashar asked, his gaze going towards his superior. Leon took a step backwards, putting some space between himself and the plasma rifle the young Sangheili held. "We hand over this vessel and we get to live. Having the Lieutenant on board was merely a fortunate coincidence."

"You will be unable to return home, Jerashar. You will be dishonoured for betraying us like this."

"But my family will be safe and they will not have been dishonoured."

Rel said nothing in response to this. He appeared to understand, though he was no less angry about it.

"Many of our brothers have died..."

"And I regret that. I was promised that this ship would be taken without bloodshed."

"You trusted the word of a human?" Rel's tone was one of disgust.  
"You fool."

Leon had his hands up still, aware that the two mercenaries at the other side of the room had started walking towards him. He knew better than to simply give himself up to an uncertain fate, especially when it was likely he would simply be executed for his trouble. However, he had Jerashar behind him who would no doubt try to stop him if he tried to escape. Sangheili were very strong opponents in a fight, Leon knew this from first-hand experience.

In a way, Leon felt sorry for Jerashar. A clearly honourable individual forced into a very dishonourable situation. There was clearly remorse on the young Sangheili's conscience, not that it would make the current situation any better.

The two mercenaries closed in towards Leon, both holding submachine guns. As they came close, Leon allowed his close-combat training to kick in as he grabbed one of the mercenaries by the arm and crouched slightly, throwing the man over his shoulder and sending him into the floor with a loud thump! The Spartan was quick to react to the other soldier, sending a powerful blow straight into his gut which sent him reeling backwards. Hefting up the fallen soldier's submachine gun, Leon gripped it in one hand and sent a volley of fire into the other soldier. Slight sprays of blood erupted out of the holes that were blasted through his combat armour, each impact causing the soldier to twitch and convulse before he finally fell to the floor.

Rel lashed out at the two mercenaries ahead of him at that point, catching them off-guard as their attentions were focused more towards Leon's actions. He caught one of them by the neck before slamming him into the nearest wall, an audible crack sounding throughout the command centre as the man's neck broke. The other mercenary fired off a shot from his submachine gun that clipped Rel in the left shoulder but this wound was nothing to the Sangheili. He practically ignored it as he sent a crippling punch into the human's face, breaking his nose and shattering his jaw. The soldier fell to the floor, blood pouring from his nose and mouth. Rel bent down and hefted up one of the submachine guns that had been dropped, turning to look at Jerashar.

Leon could do little but watch as both Sangheili started shooting at one another. Jerashar was riddled with bullets from Rel's submachine gun, his armour only deflecting some of the rounds. Rel was pummelled by plasma rifle fire, each searing bolt of energy causing him to

grunt and stumble. Both Sangheili went down shooting, their hands clasped tightly upon their weapons as they hit the floor.

Leon had little time to think. There were still mercenaries on the ship and all of them were out to get him. The soldier who he had knocked to the floor was still conscious and lying at his feet, only just recovering from the blow he had received. Leon bent down and grabbed him by the collar, lifting him up and onto his feet before throwing him against the terminals at the end of the room. Above, the main status displays blinked and pulsed, casting an eerie blue glow over the Spartan and the mercenary.

"Where's Caine?" He barked into the soldier's face, causing him to reel back noticeably in fright.

"He's on the planet..." The soldier squirmed against the consoles as Leon grabbed him by the throat, squeezing ever so gently. "There's a fortress. He has a compound about three kilometres south of it."

There were noises from the corridor outside: footsteps, voices. There were more mercenaries on their way to the command centre and Leon knew it would only be a matter of moments before they arrived.

"What are the coordinates?" Leon asked. He had observed Rel and some of his crew operate the consoles. The graphical representation of the planet in question floated upon the main status display and a few specific locations had been marked in red. There was a good chance that the soldier would not actually know the exact coordinates, but all Leon needed was the general location.

"The fortress is...on the south-eastern continent..." The soldier pointed towards the graphical depiction of the planet above, his finger going towards one of the marked regions. "The compound's not far from there..."

Leon had all he needed. He slammed the soldier's head into the console, knocking him out cold before throwing him to the floor. Using his free-hand, Leon began to tap at the holographic keys, manipulating the image above, tilting it and zooming in and out. He utilized the translator device the unconscious mercenary had been carrying. It took him a moment to realize that he could not plot a course from this console, so he made his way over to what he correctly assumed to be the navigator's position. It was simple enough to plot a course for the planet, though he could imagine the complexities involved for setting longer journeys, especially ones through slip-space. All he needed was to get the ship flying down to the location in question and from what he could tell he was close to getting it to do just that.

The double doors some distance behind him slid open. A pair of black armoured soldiers walked in, weapons raised. Leon turned around and opened fire, mowing both of them down within seconds. The doors slid shut a moment later but it was clear that there were more mercenaries on the way. Running towards the panel by the door, Leon was quick to activate the lock. That would keep the mercenaries out for a while, but they would eventually resort to more destructive tactics to get through.

He returned to the navigator's position and watched as a line

appeared on the holographic display, one that depicted the ship's current course. He lined it up with the location he wanted, making sure to zoom in on it as much as he could. Warning lights and red symbols were flashing across the screens now and they became even more pronounced when he activated the ship's engines. He was able to use the translator he had acquired to decipher much of the text that was on the screens before him. This made it an awful lot easier for him to work out just what he was doing and made finding the engine controls a whole lot easier. With no hesitation whatsoever, he put the ship to the fastest conventional speed it could go, sending it on a crash course towards the planet.

He could hear thumping at the bulkhead door now. The door he had used to enter the command centre slid open and he realized that he had forgotten all about it. A mercenary stormed inside, firing a submachine gun. Leon crouched as bullets pounded into the consoles near him, sending sparks flying. He took aim at the soldier and put him down with a short volley of rounds. Somewhere else along the ship, the umbilical connecting Caine's cruiser to the stealth ship tore away, sending a sickening metal *\_crunch\_* resounding throughout the ship.

Leon could only wait as the graphical representation of the planet grew in size on the main display. There were no windows and thus no way for him to get a real view, but he could easily imagine it. The remaining mercenaries on board probably had a good idea of what was occurring and if they had not, they would probably get the gist of it once the ship started plunging through the planet's atmosphere. Already the ship had started to skirt along it, shaking violently. Metal armour plating groaned loudly under the strain, the shields only doing so much to absorb the friction pressing against the ship on all sides. Leon had nothing left to do but wait for the inevitable. He put his back against the console and slumped against it, watching the doors while the entire vessel shook around him.

There was a chance he would not survive the crash but he was confident that staying in the command centre would give him a great deal of protection. Covenant-built ships were usually very sturdy, though he doubted one like this was designed to enter a planet's atmosphere. By the time it got through it, it would be travelling like a meteor and would probably leave a very large crater in its wake. He would have to rely on the automated systems to set the ship down as gently as the circumstances allowed, but again there was no guarantee that this would be gentle enough to prevent serious damage from occurring.

Leon watched the doors and continued to wait, feeling strangely at ease with himself. He was getting close to Caine now, he could feel it.

## 28. Processing

\*\*Processing\*\*

March 7th, 2558

The interior air of the laboratory was quite cool, a definite contrast to the searing heat of the desert outside. Kal'Shayar was

sweating nonetheless, his torso bare and his hands tied behind his back as he was escorted towards the pods in the centre of the ancient Forerunner laboratory. He knew his situation was dire, he knew that there was little chance for him to find a way out but he also knew better than to simply give up. Elise was at the other side of the room, her hands bound and a gun pressed against the back of her head as she knelt on the floor, forced to watch as the mercenaries took Kal'Shayar closer to the Forerunner machinery. Her expression was one of anguish, seemingly convinced that he would die. For a while Kal'Shayar had not been afraid of death. Now, simply looking at Elise told him that he could no longer be so selfish. He had to live, if only for her. He could not allow his son and his followers to keep her in their custody. It was doubtful they would treat her well. He hated to think of what they may do to her once he was gone.

He had taken in his surroundings well, mulling over what he could do if he tried to escape. There were Kig-Yar soldiers scattered about, including a few who stood upon a set of catwalks above and looked down upon the whole lab. They would have the best vantage point if a fight erupted and there was no doubt in Kal'Shayar's mind that they would gun him down without hassle. There were human mercenaries standing guard around the lab as well, better equipped than the Kig-Yar counterparts as they were part of Caine's organized private force. Most were ex-military, no longer content with fighting for the UNSC. Most now worked for a fat pay-check and enjoyed the freedom such work gave. There were little rules and regulations they needed to follow. They could do what they wanted as long as it furthered Caine's ends and they would get paid for it. These were the sort of soldiers Kal'Shayar despised, as they went against the honour-driven code he had been brought up in following. He fought to protect his species while these soldiers only swore allegiance to money.

Standing near the main set of computer banks was Colonel Green. Kal'Shayar had had little interaction with the Colonel though from what he had heard of him it appeared that the mercenary was very much the type who enjoyed his job. The fact that he was smiling at Kal'Shayar as he was escorted past the computers indicated as much.

Kal'Shayar was halted a few metres from one of the Forerunner pods. He looked upon it, able to see the glowing streams of energy that flowed down its length. Lev'Kanar had made it clear what might happen to him if he was put through this 'process' and it was far from appealing. Kal'Shayar turned his head, his gaze falling upon his son who stood at the far side of the room. He was watching him carefully, his gaze lacking any sign of emotion. Lev'Kanar was truly lost, it seemed, as he was so intent on ruining his father. It made Kal'Shayar wonder just what it was he had done to cause Lev'Kanar to take this direction in his life. If anything, he knew he had failed him. As his father, it had been his responsibility to raise the boy in a way that would prevent him from falling into this sort of life. Clearly, Kal'Shayar had not been up to the task. In a way, he was still proud of his son. Lev'Kanar had achieved something that very few Skirmishers ever would: he had gained a large following and had put together a scheme to ensure the 'future of their species', as the young Skirmisher so eloquently put it. It may not have been the sort of life Kal'Shayar had envisioned for him, but it was admirable in some respects.

Colonel Green approached Kal'Shayar, an unnerving grin forming on as his face as he regarded the Skirmisher.

"You know, if there's one thing I like about you Skirmishers, it's how you fuckers die." Green kept his grin up as he leaned closer to Kal'Shayar, his eyes carrying a menacing glint as he peered directly into those on the Skirmisher. "That's right, birdman. The sounds you make, that pretty purple blood of yours...I like the way you die." He paused for a moment, his grin widening into an all-out smile. He chuckled suddenly: it was an unnerving sound, one that echoed throughout the vast chamber. It carried an underlying sense of madness, as if Colonel Green was not at all right in the head. Kal'Shayar said nothing but he knew that the Colonel was one he would be sure to kill. All he needed now was a means of getting out, as there was little he could do when surrounded by so many gun-toting foes.

He turned his head again, his gaze going towards Elise. Their eyes met, the sadness visible within hers. Kal'Shayar had never been a very religious sort, but he could not help but think that the two of them had been brought together for a reason. He might even go so far as to think that they were right for each other, despite their obvious differences. Never once in his life had he thought he would fall for a human, but now, after it had actually occurred, he could not imagine any other outcome. He had promised to protect her and so to be bound and surrounded as he was sent a tumultuous wave of rage through him. He could not let it end like this. There was so much still to do, he still had a long time left to live, as did Elise. He could not help but think that their time together had been far too short. Why would they find each other, only to be dragged apart so soon afterwards?

All this did was steel his determination to escape. He had counted up the foes inside the lab and was already constructing some sort of plan. Whatever the Forerunner machinery did to him, he would have to survive it. That was all he could do. The fact that it had killed several others before him and left the survivors with completely ruined minds did not bode well for his chances.

There was the sound of a distant rumble at that moment, as if something had broke the sound barrier high above. Everyone within the laboratory froze for a second as the shockwave followed, slamming into the old fortress with as much as subtlety as a rail-gun. Outside, a Covenant stealth-ship fell from the sky, plummeting along a slight trajectory that sent it flying over the fortress and into the desert hills beyond.

The entire laboratory shook, causing many to stumble. One of the computer banks nearby sparked and smoked, the lights above dimming before the entire laboratory fell into darkness. Kal'Shayar knew what had to be done and was quick to react, sending a leg out to his left that tripped up the human mercenary who had been escorting him. The man fell, dropping his shotgun which in turn clattered across the floor.

Kal'Shayar dived behind the nearest onyx bench as the lights came back on. The fallen mercenary was only a short distance away and so Kal'Shayar delivered a sharp but powerful kick into the side of the mercenary's head, causing it to snap back painfully before sending the human into unconsciousness, his skull fractured. There was only a

few seconds for Kal'Shayar to react before everyone in the room started shooting at him, so he wasted no time in turning around and using his bound hands to remove the combat knife from the sheath on the fallen mercenary's belt. With the knife gripped in his fingers, he awkwardly used it to cut through the ropes at his wrists. Someone shouted at that point and all hell promptly broke loose, just as Kal'Shayar completely freed his hands.

The other mercenary who had been escorting him came around the side of the onyx bench. He was a tall man, outfitted in the typical black combat gear that all of Caine's mercenaries wore. Kal'Shayar jumped onto his feet, the knife gripped in one hand as he sent it straight into the man's chest, piercing through the armour padding before it found its way between the ribs and into the heart.

Kal'Shayar turned the man around as he died, one hand going for the pistol contained in the mercenary's waist holster. Pulling it free, he felt the first impact as someone fired a side-arm at him from across the room. The small calibre round pounded into the armoured form of the dead mercenary, becoming embedded in his chest and causing a sizable spray of blood to blossom forth. Kal'Shayar switched the safety off on his newly acquired pistol, finding that it felt right at home within his grip. He had some experience with human weapons and found that they were often just as effective as their Covenant counterparts, if not more so in some cases.

There were two of the mercenaries up ahead with their weapons out, one being a female judging from the shape. She held a shotgun while the male mercenary to her right carried a standard-issue pistol. Both opened fire, the shotgun's buckshot causing an eruption of blood from the front of the dead mercenary Kal'Shayar was holding out in front of him. The force of the impact was enough to cause the Skirmisher to lose his grip on the body, allowing it to fall from his hands and land upon the floor with a quiet *\_thump\_*.

Kal'Shayar pulled the trigger on his sidearm, a round going straight into the female mercenary's stomach. She fell onto the floor, clutching her bleeding guts and shouting loudly. Now exposed, Kal'Shayar dived onto the floor again, aware that the Kig-Yar standing on the catwalks above were levelling their weapons at him.

He landed near the dead mercenary, red blood having pooled around the unfortunate soldier. Kal'Shayar used it as a rather primitive form of makeshift cover, lying against the bench and by the body as he took his attention up to the catwalks. By now, Colonel Green had started to back away across the room, a rather sizeable handgun clasped in one hand. It was some sort of powerful hand cannon from what Kal'Shayar could see but luckily the Colonel was unable to get a clean shot and instead ducked behind a pillar across the laboratory, grabbing the captive Elise with one hand as he went.

The mercenary who had been shot in the stomach was still screaming. The others had spread out and opened fire, bullets pounding off of the onyx bench behind him. A few slammed into the front of the Forerunner pod, smashing the thick glass front. Orange warning lights flashed and a fire started within the nearest pod, though no one was particularly worried about that. Kal'Shayar's nostrils were hit by the pungent stench of smoke as it billowed out of the damaged pod. It would provide a helpful smoke-screen if it kept coming out the way it

did.

The mercenary across the room fired another shot. This one hit the dead mercenary next to Kal'Shayar, causing a spurt of blood that splattered across the Skirmisher's face. He tilted slightly, peering over the mercenary's bloodied corpse before firing another shot at the soldier across the room. The shot went a bit wide, clipping the fallen female mercenary in the leg. Her screams became louder now as she attempted to hold in her guts and stem the bleeding from her destroyed kneecap.

Kal'Shayar looked up, watching as two of the Kig-Yar marksmen on the catwalks above began to fire. They both used Covenant Carbines, the green shafts of energy sending searing heat frighteningly close to the Skirmisher. Kal'Shayar returned fire, a round catching one of the marksman in the head. That part of his skull exploded in a shower of dark purple blood, complete with fragments of bone and chunks of brain, before he fell forwards and plummeted from the catwalk. He landed on top of a computer, smashing the monitor beneath him and sending sparks flying.

Kal'Shayar heard movement behind him and, still lying down, rolled around to face it. A mercenary with a Designated Marksman Rifle, or 'DMR' as it was otherwise known, came running into view. He was quick on the trigger, putting a round into the floor near Kal'Shayar's legs. The impact kicked up a small cloud of dust that caught the Skirmisher by surprise, causing him to shift his body somewhat out of the way as he emptied the last few rounds left in the pistol towards the marksman. The three bullets found their mark, with two punching through the mercenary's chest and another hitting him in the throat. The mercenary stumbled backwards, blood spurting out of his neck before he hit the wall and slumped against it, unmoving.

Kal'Shayar pushed himself up against the bench, ducking as another few rounds struck the top of it. Clouds of dust exploded over him, showering him with metal fragments. His heart pounding wildly in his chest, he stopped to eject the spent magazine from his pistol before he looked around with some desperation for a new one. The wounded mercenary across the room was still screaming, though one of her comrades was attempting to drag her into cover.

Kal'Shayar dived against the dead mercenary near him, forced to close his eyes momentarily as another round struck the bloodied corpse and sent blood flying into his face. He pulled the two spare magazines from the waist pouches of the dead mercenary before sliding back into cover. He was aware that the mercenaries were moving in to flank him, apparently confident in the fact that he was outnumbered.

Above, one of the Kig-Yar marksman levelled his carbine and opened fire. Kal'Shayar fell backwards as the green beams struck the bench, burning holes into the intricately detailed patterns etched within the onyx. He loaded his pistol as he hit the ground before levelling it towards the marksman above. Another beam struck the floor near his head, briefly throwing off his aim as he fired. The first couple of bullets struck the catwalk, pinging off of the metal and flying elsewhere. Adjusting his aim as the marksman ducked, Kal'Shayar sent a bullet straight into the Kig-Yar's chest. It punched through the rugged armour there and sent a healthy spray of purple blood forth before the marksman fell backwards and collapsed against the metal railing behind him, becoming motionless.

Kal'Shayar dived against the dead mercenary once again, opening fire at the those across the room. One of them was leaning around a pillar, taking pot-shots at him with a pistol. A bullet struck the pillar's surface near his head, sending a small spray of fragments that caught him in the eyes and made him stumble backwards, yelling. Kal'Shayar could still see the wounded mercenary from before who was still shouting and clutching her bleeding wounds, their comrade only just about to push them into cover. Kal'Shayar seized the opportunity and shot down both, sending a bullet into the head of the wounded mercenary before another two found their way into the side of the soldier who had been dragging her. He fell onto the floor, groaning while blood pooled around him.

"You fucking piece of shit birdman. Who the fuck do you think you are\_?" Green was yelling from behind his pillar, anger clear in his voice judging from the mostly incoherent insults he was started spewing out. He was not the only one, since another mercenary, another female one at that, was yelling something about beating the shit out of the Skirmisher.

One of the mercenary's went to throw a grenade, but Green was quick to tell him otherwise: "No grenades! You'll damage the equipment!"

Kal'Shayar pulled himself back from the shot-up corpse of the mercenary, just in time for another round to strike the mangled body in the head. The already dead mercenary's head exploded, revealing the now minced-meat brain within.

He pressed himself against the back of the bench once again, pausing to reload his pistol. By now, the air was becoming thick with smoke and the fire that had started within the Forerunner pod was beginning to worsen. Above, a pair of mercenaries ran into view on one of the catwalks, both armed with DMRs. Three more mercenaries came running into the room through the entrance, clearly having heard the gunfire and intent on investigating. The trio spread out, one of which was armed with a shotgun. He ducked and fired, sending the buckshot into the top of the bench. Plumes of dust exploded forth, raining down upon Kal'Shayar as he kept low and slid a new magazine into his pistol. Another female mercenary was behind a pillar at the right side of the room and had started to return fire with a powerful M6D pistol. She was yelling threats over the din of the gunfire, but none of them bothered Kal'Shayar. He had far more pressing matters to worry about, considering his current situation. For a moment, he pondered just why he had put himself into this situation but he was quick to remind himself. Elise was nowhere to be seen, something that was a relief to him, if only briefly as it occurred to him that meant she was still being held captive. He needed to get out of here to find her.

Kal'Shayar turned around as the two mercenaries on the catwalk behind him started opening fire, high-powered rifle rounds pounding into the floor and bench near him. He faced them and started shooting, ducking slightly as a bullet struck the bench near his shoulder and sent fragments of onyx flying into his face. One of the mercenaries was struck by two of the bullets, each penetrating the armour on his chest and sending forth subdued sprays of blood. He fell forwards and plummeted off of the catwalk before landing into a heap upon the floor several metres ahead. He twitched awkwardly for a while as the

last vestiges of life left his battered body.

"You're finished, birdman!" Green shouted from somewhere in the room. Another pair of mercenaries came running into the laboratory from outside, both armed with submachine guns.

The remaining mercenary on the catwalk stepped back behind the railing but Kal'Shayar adjusted his aim, planting a bullet between the gaps in the rails that struck the mercenary in the crotch. He dropped his weapon and started screaming, clutching at the bloody meaty mess that his groin had become. Kal'Shayar felt nothing considering all the pain he was causing, his combat and survival instincts having since kicked in. There was nothing on his mind now save for the need to survive the fight and save Elise.

Checking the magazine in his pistol, Kal'Shayar found that there was only one bullet left. He had no spare magazines and there were no weapons in immediate reach, so with an annoyed grimace he quickly considered his options. The female mercenary with the shotgun had leaned around a pillar ahead, sending another blast of buckshot in his direction. Kal'Shayar hit the floor as the pellets impacted with the computer on the bench to his side, causing the entire thing to explode into a shower of smoke and sparks. Without hesitation he rose to his feet and started to run towards the mercenary. Shots pounded the wall behind him as the other mercenaries opened fire. One of the Forerunner terminals that was built into the wall exploded as the bullets impacted, sparks flying over him.

He raised his pistol and fired the shot left in the chamber. It caught the mercenary in the right arm, causing her to yelp in pain and drop the shotgun. Kal'Shayar covered the remaining few metres with a dive, both hands gripping the shotgun before he tucked his head in and somersaulted, rolling back onto his feet. He planted the barrel of the shotgun against the mercenary's chest, taking in one last surprised gaze from her before he pulled the trigger. She was sent flying backwards a short distance by the force of the impact, her entire front covered with bloodied holes.

The mercenaries further away had started to advance, each opening fire with their respective weapons. Kal'Shayar stepped behind the pillar, keeping the shotgun gripped in his hands as bullets pinged off of the metal near him. He took a deep breath, forced to spit some of the blood out of his mouth. None of the blood that covered his form was his own and most of it was red, though there was some dark purple amongst it all.

Stepping around the pillar, he raised the shotgun. Pulling the trigger, the weapon buckled slightly in his grip as the lead buckshot erupted from the barrel and hit the first mercenary dead in the chest. The others began to scatter, a few letting off shots as Kal'Shayar advanced. At this close range, the shotgun was devastating and Kal'Shayar could see that he had caught these mercenaries completely by surprise.

He pumped the weapon before shooting it again, the buckshot this time around hitting one of the mercenaries in the head. His head promptly exploded, shredded into chunks by the pellets that cut a swathe straight through flesh and bone. He fell as his buddies began to run for cover. Kal'Shayar swivelled around quickly to follow one of them, pumping the shotgun again before firing. He hit the mercenary as he

dived around a pillar, tearing holes into his stomach and sending red blood splattering across the pillar's beige tones.

One of the mercenaries went running for cover behind a bench in the centre of the room. Kal'Shayar was quick on the pump-action before he lined up another shot, the pellets scraping the mercenary's shoulder. He fell to the floor and began to squirm about where he lay, clutching his wound. Kal'Shayar followed up with another shot that blew holes through the mercenary's chest and left him motionless.

Another mercenary stepped around the pillar, his pistol raised. Kal'Shayar pointed his shotgun towards him and the pair paused, their eyes meeting. The standoff was quickly ended when Kal'Shayar pulled the trigger on his shotgun, but his heart skipped a beat when the weapon clicked on empty. With a second's pause and a clear smirk from the mercenary, Kal'Shayar instead threw the weapon towards the soldier. He stumbled slightly as the weapon smacked against his front, allowing Kal'Shayar to run up to him and grab his gun-wielding arm. He put one hand around the pistol clenched in the mercenary's grip but the man was not about to give it up easily. The pair fought for control of the weapon for several seconds, each straining the muscles in their arms and chest before Kal'Shayar finally forced the mercenary's down, pointing the pistol towards the floor.

Kal'Shayar's finger hit the trigger, sending a shot straight into the mercenary's left foot. Much of his foot exploded as a result of the explosive rounds the M6D pistol was loaded with. He started screaming, impulsively letting go of the pistol while he hopped backwards and stumbled against a bench. Kal'Shayar spun the pistol around in his right hand before levelling it towards the mercenary and firing.

The shot went straight through the man's heart before the round exploded, blowing a hole clean through him. He fell backwards and hit the floor with a thud!

Kal'Shayar looked around the wrecked laboratory, watching as a pair of Kig-Yar mercenaries came running into view across the room. Both of them opened fire with plasma pistols, green bolts of energy zipping by the Skirmisher as he stepped behind the nearest pillar. Bodies littered the floor nearby and blood stained some of the walls and parts of the floor, but despite the carnage the fight was not quite over.

Kal'Shayar knew to conserve his ammunition and so took careful aim from around the pillar towards one of the Kig-Yar before pulling the trigger. The shot blew a chunk out of the Kig-Yar's head, sending purple blood across the wall behind him. The other one leaned around a bench and placed several green bolts of plasma energy into the pillar by Kal'Shayar. The Skirmisher was no longer too concerned with this as he began to step forwards, determined to finish the fight here.

The Kig-Yar mercenary jumped up from behind cover, about to open fire at the approaching Skirmisher. Kal'Shayar was faster on the trigger, planting a bullet right between the Jackal's eyes. The back of his head erupted into a spray of purple blood and bits of bone before the rest of his body hit the floor and remained there.

At that moment, everything fell silent. Kal'Shayar lowered his pistol and took the chance to check the magazine within it: there were still eight rounds loaded inside. He returned his attention to the destroyed lab, surveying the carnage: dead humans and Kig-Yar were scattered about, blood splattered across the walls and floors. None of the bodies were moving, so Kal'Shayar could at least rest easy in the fact that he had done a thorough job. He felt no glory in the killing, but he knew that it had been necessary. If he was to rescue Elise and confront his son, he needed to get out of this lab.

He heard movement from up ahead and instinctively raised his pistol. From out of cover came Colonel Green, except this time he had an arm around Elise. He held her in front of him, using her as a shield while he used his free-hand to push the barrel of his hand cannon against the side of her head. Elise went to speak but Green pushed forcefully against the bottom of her jaw with his arm, stopping her from opening her mouth. From what Kal'Shayar could see, she was relatively unharmed. That was a good thing for Green, since now Kal'Shayar did not strictly need to kill him. It was still an option, of course, but he could live with himself if he let the Colonel go.

"Let her go," Kal'Shayar said, aiming the pistol at the Colonel.

Green, who had some patches of red blood splattered across his uniform from the gun battle, simply shook his head and gave an incredulous smile. He laughed, a sleazy but desperate sort of laugh that sounded like the sort one would expect from a man who would probably be right at home in a mental ward.

"\_You're\_ giving \_me\_ orders?" It was as if he could not believe it. Kal'Shayar did not see the joke. "You're in no position to give orders, birdman. There are about fifty more of my guys outside, in the fort. Do you think they're just going to let you walk out of here?"

"No." Kal'Shayar knew he would have his work cut out for him. "Maybe you could convince them to let us go? This is no longer your fight. I simply want Elise freed. Why trouble yourself with what my son and General Caine have started? You are just a soldier. You do not need to die for a corrupt General."

"This is more than that. This is more than the three of us." Green tightened his grip around Elise again. She grunted in a mix of discomfort and annoyance, squirming in his hold but unable to free herself. She looked remarkably calm. considering the circumstances. Kal'Shayar expected no less from her.

"Let her go, Colonel." Kal'Shayar took a step forward but stopped when he saw Green tighten the hold on his pistol, his finger resting around the trigger.

"Get back, birdman. Or I'll blow this bitch's head clean off."

Kal'Shayar took a deep breath, taking careful aim. It was a risk he would have to take and from the look in Elise's eyes, it appeared that she was not too keen on it. Regardless, he would not be wasting

any more time trying to reason with this man. It was clear he worshipped the General too much to do that.

"You're finished. You'll never get out of this fortress alive." Green had started to back off towards the exit, holding Elise against him as he went. Kal'Shayar remained where he was, keeping his weapon trained on the Colonel.

He decided it was now or never and so took the shot. The bullet found its way between the Colonel's eyes and blew the back of his head open. Blood sprayed across Elise's face as the dead Colonel loosened his grip on her and fell backwards, his pistol falling from his grip and clattering onto the floor. Elise had a stunned look on her face for a moment as she regarded the Colonel's body and then Kal'Shayar.

Kal'Shayar glanced at the fallen Colonel, feeling only some slight sense of satisfaction. It was not quite enough to make him feel like he had done the right thing, but he had reached a point where he had gotten a bit tired of all the killing.

He lowered his pistol and gazed towards Elise, a wave of relief washing over him. She approached him, still shaken from all that had just happened but nonetheless the look of surprise quickly gave way to one of joy. She moved against him and embraced him, leaning into his chest despite the blood that covered him. Kal'Shayar wrapped his arms around her, remembering how good it felt to be close to her.

She pulled back from the embrace and looked into his face, taking a few deep breaths in order to compose herself.

"You could have shot me," Elise said.

"I would never let that happen." Kal'Shayar realized just how reckless taking the shot had been, as any slight error in his aim could have cost him dearly. However, there was an element of risk to everything. He had not been about to just let Green carry Elise away.

"Well, I'm glad you did what you did." She put a hand to her face and used a sleeve to wipe the blood away. None of it was actually her blood and she knew this quite well judging from the slightly disgusted look she gave.

Kal'Shayar turned around and walked back into the centre of the lab. His son was probably out in the fortress somewhere, most likely vying for a means of escape. Lev'Kanar's plans had obviously fallen apart, giving Kal'Shayar an opportunity to make sure that they could never be fulfilled. He walked over to one of the dead mercenaries and knelt by the body, removing the pair of grenades that were clipped to the dead man's waist. Elise walked over to him and watched as he collected more grenades from the other dead mercenaries until he had about a half a dozen held in his arms.

Carrying the grenades with him, he made his way across the lab and into the adjoining room where the altered Kig-Yar and Skirmishers were kept in cryogenic suspension. He took about a minute to scatter a few of the grenades about the room, sitting them on top of the stasis pods before he made his way back to the doorway. Elise watched

from the end of the corridor as he pulled the pin from the grenade he still held and threw it into the room, making sure to turn around and start running.

The explosion came a few seconds later, the grenade's detonation setting off each of the grenades in turn. The pods were consumed in flame and white smoke billowed from the pods when their glass panels smashed from the force of the detonations. Red lights began to flash throughout the room as the oxygen supplies to each pod exploded as well, filling the entire room with billowing flame. Kal'Shayar emerged from the corridor with Elise and the pair moved away from the doorway as the flame erupted forth, sending searing hot air past them before the entire firestorm died almost as quickly as it had begun.

Kal'Shayar took a quick glance towards the cold storage room, seeing that there was little left of the pods and equipment inside. Satisfied, he found another grenade on one of the dead mercenaries and pulled the pin before throwing it towards the Forerunner pods in the middle of the lab. Taking Elise by the arm, he ducked with her behind a pillar seconds before the grenade exploded and sent a deafening rumble throughout the room. The central pods were completely obliterated in the blast, pieces of metal tearing from the frames before being sent flying with lethal velocity. pieces raining down around Kal'Shayar and Elise. Another fire erupted in the middle of the laboratory where the pods had once stood. Kal'Shayar rose to his feet along with Elise before he looked towards the exit.

"I am going to find Lev'Kanar," he said, turning to Elise. There would still be plenty of mercenaries out in the fortress and it was unlikely he would be able to take them all on alone. "I will understand if you do not wish to join. We may very well die."

"We won't," Elise said with an optimistic grin, turning to face the Skirmisher. She put a hand to his face, running her fingers through the black plume of feathers at his head. Despite her optimism, Kal'Shayar knew that the odds were against them. He did not wish to be a defeatist, but the fact was that they were vastly outnumbered and outgunned.

"Let's go find that boy of yours," Elise added. Kal'Shayar nodded and the pair started towards the exit. Regardless of what happened, Kal'Shayar would only regret not having met Elise sooner.

## 29. The Walls of Jericho

\*\*The Walls of Jericho\*\*

March 7th, 2558

Crashing the Covenant stealth ship probably had not been the smartest thing to do, but Leon knew full well how desperate things had gotten. Caine had to be stopped, as did Lev'Kanar, and if that meant ploughing a perfectly good stealth vessel into a desert, then that would be exactly what he would do. He had spent the crash sitting in the command centre on board the ship, waiting for the inevitable impact while some of Caine's mercenaries tried to get in through the doors. The trip through the planet's atmosphere had shaken the ship violently, causing Leon to sit against a bench and clasp its edges

tightly in an attempt to stop himself from being thrown around. After that, the ship had descended through the heavens above Decided Heart. It went on a direct run towards General Caine's headquarters. The course had been plotted by Leon earlier, though the ship had strayed slightly off course as a result of the shaky flight through the planet's atmosphere.

The impact had caused the entire ship to lurch around him violently. The mercenaries outside of the command centre had stopped trying to break through the doors and had presumably run for shelter, or perhaps had even been thrown to the floor when the ship had rattled around them with enough force to even launch Leon against the nearby wall. He recovered from his brief flight quickly and grabbed onto a panel in the wall as sparks shot from several of the consoles in the command centre. The holographic displays at the front of the command centre winked off and smoke plumed from one of the projectors below them. From some distant corner of the ship, a loud tearing sound could be heard as metal plating was literally ripped from its housings. This was followed by the unmistakable whooshing sound of depressurisation occurring, though it lasted only a split second as the outside atmosphere billowed in. Red warning lights were flashing about the command centre but Leon had no idea what any of them meant. Warning messages had appeared on several of the remaining displays, all of them in the Sangheili dialect and as a result completely unreadable to the Spartan.

The ship ploughed through sand dunes and scraped against rocks before it finally came to a halt within viewing range of the outpost where Caine was located. Leon was on his feet as soon as the ship came to rest and he proceeded to take stock of his weapons: one submachine gun with a single full magazine, one side-arm with about four bullets loaded into it and one grenade he had salvaged from a dead mercenary. It would have to be enough, since Caine would no doubt have an entire army protecting him.

Making his way towards one of the doors, Leon put aside his weapons as he put both hands to the middle of the double doors and began to pull. The opening mechanism was throwing sparks, so he would have to force it open manually. His Spartan strength enabled him to open it about an inch, though that was all he needed as he forced his fingers through the gap and pulled with greater give. The door slid open, creaking along its length with a rather piercing metal grinding noise. He squeezed through the metre wide gap he had opened for himself and found the corridor beyond to be a complete mess. Panels were hanging from the walls and cables dangled from parts of the ceiling, some of them sparking as energy still flowed through them. There was an airlock not too far from here so he immediately started for it, traversing the wrecked corridor before taking a left turn and heading down another identical corridor. The mercenaries had apparently vacated this part of the ship, although he found one lying dead a short distance ahead of him. This mercenary was buried underneath a heavy metal pylon that had fallen from the ceiling, impaling him through the chest. Leon searched the dead man's body and found two more magazines for his side-arm. Sticking them into a pouch at his waist, Leon continued towards the airlock.

The airlock had seen recent use, judging from the fact that it was wide open. Through the small chamber between doors, Leon could see outside: yellowish-brown sand dunes and jagged, rocky outcrops went on far into the horizon. The sky above was a bright blue in colour,

smattered with light clouds. The sun was at its highest point, its harsh rays beating down upon the desert landscape with an unrelenting heat. Leon began to sweat as soon as he neared the open airlock and he was reminded of the environment on New Sanctuary, complete with the heat and the dry air that had left him feeling parched.

The airlock was on the ship's side, now located a few metres above the ground. Leon had no trouble in jumping down, hitting the soft sand with both feet. Ahead, he saw a trail of footsteps going off in the direction of the outpost. The outpost in question appeared as several silver and grey buildings about a kilometre across the rocks and dunes, their smooth surfaces glinting brightly in the sunlight. Even further away, sitting far out across the desert plateau, was a large stone fortress. On the very edge of the horizon was a vast town, filled with the tall, curved spires that were typical in Covenant-built settlements. Thick plumes of black smoke wafted from places in the town, evidence of a battle that had been raging for some time.

Leon heard movement to his right and turned around and saw that there were about five of Caine's black-uniformed mercenaries standing about twenty metres from him, all of them with their weapons drawn. Another truckload were coming to a halt to his flank, the military-grade vehicle opening its doors and allowing about a dozen more of the soldiers to pile out of it. Among them was Serena, clad completely in her MJOLNIR armour, her helmet's visor a dark colour to keep out the sun's harsh rays. She was the one who approached Leon directly while the mercenaries and soldiers spread out and surrounded him.

It occurred to Leon that he was very much outgunned. Caine was not here, so he could not simply shoot him and expect to be promptly cleaned up by the other soldiers. Serena seemed to sense what he was thinking and spoke, her voice clear as day through her JFO model helmet.

"You're surrounded, Lieutenant," Serena said. She did not have her weapon trained at Leon. Instead, it sat in a holster at her waist. There were close to twenty mercenaries standing around them, weapons pointed at the Spartan-III. Serena did not need to bother with hers, it seemed.

"Caine wants to give you a chance. Surrender." She stated this bluntly, her voice carrying no emotion whatsoever.

Leon considered it for a moment. He could surrender, maybe be taken before Caine. That might give him an opportunity to eliminate the man but it was likely that he would lose his life in the process. It seemed almost pointless, considering the fact that he was a fugitive, implicated in a terrorist plot he had been set-up to become a part of. If he died, he would die a traitor in the eyes of the UNSC, the very entity he had sworn to protect. He was no traitor, but how many people really knew the truth?

Leon dropped his submachine gun, as well as his pistol. Immediately the mercenaries rushed forward, two of them forcing him onto his knees before his wrists were bound by a pair of heavy manacles. With that done, he was pushed back onto his feet and was stripped of the rest of his equipment, including the spare magazines and single grenade he had acquired. He remained silent as the mercenaries did their work while Serena watched, her face hidden behind her dark grey

visor.

"I don't agree with the General, but he wishes to talk with you and gave me the order to take you alive." Serena approached him and Leon could sense the examining, but doubtful, gaze she cast at him through her visor. "I do commend you for your determination, Lieutenant. You hijacked a Covenant vessel and crashed it into a desert. It takes a special kind of soldier to go that far in his own personal quest for revenge."

Leon did not say anything. He did not want to give her the satisfaction and so remained silent as he was pushed into the back of the truck and flanked on all sides by armed mercenaries. Serena sat at the far end of the truck's passenger compartment and made sure to close the rear doors before the driver put the engine into gear. The drive to the outpost was short, but it was far from smooth as the truck's wheels trundled roughly over the uneven dunes and rocks that protruded from beneath the sand.

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><p>The main building at the outpost was more like an estate: all white and grey, built from stone and bricks, carrying the appearance of an old-fashioned mansion. The front was comprised of a glass set of double doors and several potted plants. White stone pillars held up the balcony while a UNSC flag flew on a pole at the roof, billowing in the breeze that flowed throughout the compound. The grounds of the compound were full of soldiers, all of them human and all part of Caine's private army. Some of them stopped to watch as Leon was lead out of the truck and escorted towards the front of the estate. The glass doors were opened by Serena, who walked ahead of him, and she lead him and his guards into the front lobby. It was a lavishly decorated room, complete with colourfully designed old-fashioned carpets and framed paintings that hung on the walls. There were some exotic alien plants in pots by some of the walls and ahead was a wide set of carpeted stairs that lead directly to the second floor.<p>

General Caine stood at the top of these stairs, watching with a noticeable grin as Leon was brought inside. He had a cigar to his mouth, as he so often did, and took a few long drags on it before pulling it away and blowing thick wafts of smoke. Serena took Leon by the arms, relieving the other guards of escorting him. Her vice-like grip went to his sides as she took him up the stairs and towards the General, who looked the younger Spartan directly in the face without a hint of intimidation. Leon was taller than him and far more muscular, but Caine was not fazed easily by such things.

"I could have had you shot," Caine said, still grinning despite the content of his statement. "But, you see, Lieutenant, I've been thinking. About everything that's happened." He paused, noticing that Leon's gaze was directed down into the floor. He frowned, if only briefly, before putting his free-hand to the Spartan's chin and pushing it up so that their eyes met.

"Look at me when I talk to you," Caine ordered, his tone becoming stern. He glanced at Serena, who stood just behind the younger Spartan. "Bring him to my office. We can talk in length there."

Serena nodded and pushed Leon along in the General's wake. Caine turned around and headed down a hallway that had been to his right, walking around a corner before finding his way to the lavish office he had made for himself. Leon was pushed into the room after the General, finding himself in a fairly wide-open room with paintings and glass cabinets set onto the walls. Caine took a seat behind his desk, tapping his still smoking cigar into a glass ashtray that sat upon it. Leaving it there, he gestured to one of the empty chairs that were across the desk from him. Serena pushed Leon towards it before forcing him to sit down, letting go of him as she took a few steps back and stood watch by the doorway. She crossed her arms, her expression unreadable through her helmet's visor.

Leon felt the soft, expensive carpet beneath his feet before taking a look around at the decor within the office. Caine had expensive tastes, this much was clear. Leon found it odd that he wanted to talk to him, especially in a place like this, as Caine had been so determined to kill him not too long ago.

"I had this whole place built several months ago," Caine said, having noticed Leon's interest in the place around him. "You could say it's my main base of operations, when I'm not on Reach or Earth. Lev'Kanar and his followers have their own base in an old fortress not far from here. We're working together, as you might have guessed. He's unearthed some very interesting things from that place."

"Why have you brought me here?" Leon spoke, for the first time since he had landed here. Caine raised an eyebrow momentarily, as if surprised to hear Leon had broken his silence. He sat back in his chair, looking straight at the Spartan with his usually friendly gaze. However, it was all quite a convincing falsehood. Underneath that warm, 'friendly General' exterior was the heart of a cold-blooded killer and manipulator.

"You brought yourself here, Leon," Caine said, apparently correcting the Spartan. "You're the one who crashed that ship, intent on finding me. If anything, you do know how to make an entrance. Had you been more accurate in guiding that ship down, you could have sent it ploughing straight into this building. I would have been very upset had you done that."

"If you survived..."

"It's not hard to see a ship like that coming," Caine interrupted, smiling as he spoke. "You brought yourself here, I simply decided to take advantage of the situation. You see, I can't help but feel some guilt for what I've put you through. You were a promising soldier, a lot of potential. Yet you never seemed quite sure of yourself and were very much stuck in the depths of depression. I feel that I did you a favour, putting you on the team, sending you off to get Lev'Kanar."

"You used me, as you used Kal and Elise and Valerie." He said the last name with some pain. Thinking about her and what had happened to her just made him angry. His hands, still bound by the manacles, were very much secure judging from his attempts to move them.

"A means to an end." Caine took up his cigar again, putting it to his mouth before taking in a few breaths. "The UNSC was complacent. I needed a means to show them just how dangerous complacency is."

"Is that all?"

"No." Caine shook his head, letting fly a few thick clouds of smoke that wafted before Leon's face and dissipated towards the ceiling. "Humanity is strong, Leon. Stronger than it used to be. The war strengthened our resolve, gave us technological advantages no other race has. The Sangheili, the Kig-Yar...they're worse off than we are. Yet they hate our guts, especially the Sangheili. How long do you think it'll be before they decide it best to get rid of us humans?"

"You're paranoid." Leon was convinced of this. Paranoia about the other species had driven Caine to carry out his scheme, compounded by a healthy dislike of aliens in general.

"The alien races are a goddamn plague. We've already got humans mingling with Kig-Yar on some worlds. It disgusts me. They'll start seeping into every facet of our society. They'll subvert the UNSC from within. Not only have we become complacent, we've also become far too welcoming towards the likes of the Sangheili and the Kig-Yar."

"So you're a racist?"

"I believe you mean 'speciesist'." Caine frowned, putting his cigar aside again. He sounded rather passionate about the subject, though he had hidden his hatred of aliens well when interacting with the alien members of the team he had formed. "I work with Lev'Kanar as a means to an end. He has his uses, though he has outlived them by now."

"Do you want to start a war, General?" Leon narrowed his gaze towards the General, trying to work him out. What did he really want?

"War is the only thing that'll guarantee the survival and purity of humanity as a species. I got rid of the Security Council for that reason. They wanted peace, yet ignored the warnings signs that preceded the creation of the Storm Covenant. They have allowed Kig-Yar civilians into some of the colonies. We have humans and aliens mingling on an unprecedented scale. You've seen it yourself, Leon: that whore, Elise, is already in bed with Kal'Shayar. That's only the beginning. Once I've got what I wanted from Lev'Kanar, I'll kill him."

"What does he have that you want?"

"The means to create super soldiers, far in excess of anything the Spartan program could achieve. There's some problems with the process that need to be worked out, but in the meantime all I can do is help fuel a war between humanity and the Sangheili, even the Kig-Yar. Lev'Kanar believes his people can stand back and remain neutral, but he is sorely mistaken."

"Super soldiers?" Leon was unfamiliar with what Caine was referring to, as the only 'super soldier' program he was aware of was that of the Spartans.

"There's some Forerunner tech very much geared towards that sort of thing over in that fortress," Caine replied. "However, that isn't

what I brought you here to talk about. No, I want you to understand what I'm trying to achieve, maybe even join me on this crusade. I already have support from many powerful people. The Security Council was the only thing holding that support back. With them out of the picture, we can go onto to strengthening our military and eliminating the Sangheili."

Leon could see the ambition in the General's dull blue eyes, the hunger for power. He was not doing what he thought best for humanity. He was utterly convinced he would be humanity's saviour and there was nothing that he would allow to stop him from fulfilling that fantasy.

"Humanity was being held back by those idiots on the Council. We could put together a massive and powerful fleet in under a year, fitted with all of the advanced weapons technology reverse-engineered from Forerunner and Covenant tech. It could smash the Sangheili and the Kig-Yar home-worlds. The UNSC instead wanted peace. They wanted us to get along with the other races, to establish multi-species colonies. It pained me to see the UNSC becoming like this. Humanity was complacent. Complacency is the biggest mistake any empire could make. Even the walls of Jericho fell, Leon." Caine looked towards him, focusing his gaze onto the Spartan. "I want you to see things my way. I could clear your name, Leon. You would no longer be a fugitive. Just tell me you will help me work towards a better future for humanity. Help me get rid of Lev'Kanar."

Lev'Kanar had been working for a better future for his species as well. He and Caine had been destined to betray each other. Leon did not feel especially keen on helping the General. The man was a traitor to the very uniform he wore. Yet, Leon knew he could take advantage of the opportunity he had been given.

"You want me to help you kill Lev'Kanar?" Leon asked. "Then take these damn manacles off of me and I'll head over to that fortress and wring the birdman's neck myself."

"Oh, very good, Leon," Caine answered, smiling. He shook his head, managing a short chuckle as he did so. "Yes, how about I just take those manacles off, eh? I'm sure you won't just reach over here and break my neck with your superior Spartan strength."

Leon said nothing in response. He instead tested the bulky metal manacles himself, finding them to have very little give. He might have been able to break them if he put his mind to it, but there was a good chance Serena would rush over and break his neck if he tried to set himself free.

"If you kill me, you'll never have your name cleared. You'll be a traitor and a fugitive for the rest of your life. Granted, you probably won't make it out of this building alive. But would you really throw away your one chance at redemption?"

"Redemption for what? Being falsely accused of treason?" Leon could hardly believe the General's nerve. "You have the gall to imply I want redemption? You're the one who should be seeking forgiveness. You betrayed the very uniform you wear. You had innocent people killed in the coup you arranged on Earth. You would jeopardize the safety of the entire human race just to start a war you think we would win. You would have two entire species wiped out just because

you believe in human superiority. You haven't got the right. You're a power hungry madman. You may have friends in high places, but you mark my words: Once I'm done here with you, I'll track down every single last one of your friends and kill them myself."

"The right?" Caine spat angrily. This was the first time Leon had seen him lose his cool and he realized he may have just struck a nerve. The General clearly believed in what he was doing, but to be called out on his hypocrisy was the one thing he could not stand. "I've got all the right in the world. I hold all of the cards, Leon." He calmed down rather quickly, regaining his usual composure. He did rise from his seat, looking down at the Spartan with disdain.

"The Security Council used to call the shots. Now I do. You cannot seriously tell me that they were better at that than I am? They were all old, washed-out Admirals and Presidents, hung-up on their archaic notions of 'peace' and 'open arms'. They wanted to reason with the insurrectionists. You can't reason with rebels. You crush them with military might. And now they want to reason with alien races. They would dare let those disgusting species into our territory. Have you been to Valmora Prime, Leon?"

"No..."

"Have you heard of it? It's a colony, way out on the edge of the frontier. Kig-Yar and humans, working together to build a society. I've been there, Leon. It's a complete dump. It might all look nice on the outside, but I've seen the seedy underbelly. Corrupted by alien influence, the entire colony. I will make sure that it doesn't happen anywhere else. That was why we needed a change of leadership. That 'terrorist attack' on Sydney? That showed everyone that the UNSC is not safe. That we need to stop it with these lovey-dovey ideals of trying to get along when we're so fundamentally different to the likes of the Sangheili. We either isolate ourselves completely, or bomb the fuckers back to the stone age. I prefer the latter. That way there's no chance they'll bother us in the future."

"You're crazy."

"Poor people are crazy. I'm just eccentric. And a bit of eccentricity is what we need if humanity is going to survive the next few decades."

Leon had heard enough. His hands may have been bound, but his legs were not. With all the strength he could muster, he pushed both feet against the desk and kicked, sending it rolling off of its foundations before it collided with the General and slammed into him, making him stumble backwards into the wall. Within seconds Serena had started towards him but Leon rose to meet her, ducking underneath her arms as she tried to grab him.

He side-stepped her next attack as she sent a powerful punch his way. Raising his manacled wrists, he let the metal there take the Spartan's punch full-on. The metal broke under the Spartan's strength, causing the manacles to splay open and in turn free Leon's hands. He lunged against the Spartan-II, grabbing her pistol from its holster before he turned around to face the General.

He had recovered from having a desk launched in his direction and stood against the wall, his gaze going straight towards Leon. He saw

the pistol: it was a rather sizeable M6D 'hand-cannon' loaded with very powerful armour-piercing explosive rounds that could cause incredible damage. A look of utter disgust appeared on the General's face.

"I'll see you in hell, Leon." He dropped his cigar as he said this while behind Leon, Serena was just recovering from being knocked aside.

"Yeah." Leon gave little thought to his response as he pulled the trigger. The shot was deafening within the confines of the office, though Leon was not bothered by it much. Caine's head exploded into a bloody red mess, splattering chunks across the wall behind him. The rest of his lifeless body hit the floor with a dull thump, landing sprawled across the desk while blood shot out of his neck where his head had once been located.

Serena collided with Leon at that moment, sending the pistol flying from his grip and landing far out of reach. The bulky Spartan-II sent Leon into the floor, putting one hand to his throat as the other formed a gloved fist and sent a powerful blow into Leon's face. His vision momentarily blurred and every muscle and bone in his head erupted into pain. He used one hand to try and find anything he could use as a weapon, considering the fact he was in a dirty uniform and Serena was outfitted in full armour, giving her a distinct advantage.

Leon's hand went against the desk and he ripped one wooden section off of its nails, using it to bat away Serena's next incoming blow. Upon hitting her arm with it, the piece of wood shattered into several smaller pieces and the bulkier Spartan pulled her arm back as the pain reverberated up her arm. Leon pushed her off of him and jumped onto his feet, standing in a readied position as he began to pace towards the door. Like every Spartan, he had been trained in hand-to-hand combat. It was the exact same style Serena had been trained in, made all the more obvious by the very similar 'ready' pose she took, with her arms held before her at slightly different angles. Neither of them formed fists and instead kept their hands open, ready to deflect any incoming blows.

Serena lunged at him again and Leon was unable to move out of the way in time. She tackled him into the wall and their combined weights sent them both crashing through it, a glass cabinet above them shattering as chunks of plaster and splinters of wood rained upon them. They landed onto a balcony outside, no longer in the air conditioned comfort of the office. Leon hit the cement of the balcony with enough force to wind him, leaving him short of breath as Serena struck him again, this time hitting him in the chest. The sharp pain he felt there indicated a rib had broken, but the adrenaline coursing through him helped subdue the pain considerably.

Leon squirmed out of Serena's grasp and rose to his feet, sending a right hook into her helmeted face. The visor smashed, sending shards of glass into her eyes, forcing her to rip the helmet off and toss it aside. Her blonde-hair was tied back neatly, though her face was covered with small bloodied scratches from the shards of her visor that had cut into her. She started to pace around Leon and the younger Spartan made sure to keep her in front of him.

She stepped forwards and sent a punch towards his stomach. Leon

deflected it, responding with one of his own. Serena grabbed his arm and attempted a counter but Leon pulled free and sent a knee into her crotch, causing her to stumble backwards a few steps. The grounds of the compound were below them and several of the mercenaries down there had become aware of the two Spartans fighting on the balcony. None of them opened fire, as it would have been easy to hit Serena in the heat of the fight, though several of the mercenaries had started to run inside the house with the intent of ending the brawl.

Leon knew he had little time left before the mercenaries got up here. He would have to escape and try his luck out in the desert, but he could not just turn his back on Serena. She had always disliked him and judging from the look on her face, she was taking significant glee in finally getting a chance to fight him properly. It would be to the death, there was no doubt about that.

Leon stepped towards Serena. She sent a kick his way, causing him to grab her leg but she squirmed free and punched him in the jaw, making him to falter against the railing. Someone down below had the gall to start shooting, planting a few bullets in the pillar to his right before he rushed forwards and tackled Serena to the ground. The pair of them grappled with each other through the glass doors, smashing through them and landing on the floor of the carpeted hallway beyond. Two mercenaries had appeared at the end of the hallway, both raising their rifles as they tried to decide whether to open fire or not.

Leon pushed himself away from Serena and bolted back into Caine's office, giving the mercenaries an opportunity to fire. A few bullets pounded into the wall by the doorway, causing small explosions of plaster dust and wood splinters. Serena rose to her feet and ran after Leon who turned around to meet her, blocking the first of her blows before he grabbed her by the neck and sent her head into the wall. It went through the wood and plaster, opening a gash across her head. She pulled herself out of the wall and turned to face Leon again, her head covered with dust and her gaze one of absolute rage. She went to slug him again but Leon grabbed her arm and went to throw her against the wall once more. However, she ground her booted feet into the floor and instead used Leon's grip on her against him, ducking low as he tried to strike her with his left arm. She sent a blow straight into his gut, forcing him back a few steps before he hit the back wall.

He stood poised as Serena ran towards him. He became aware of some odd feeling object under his foot and he realized he had found the gun he had used to kill Caine that Serena had knocked from his grip earlier. Before he could try and grab it Serena had gone to hit him in the face. He ducked his head to one side and grabbed her arm with one hand, only for her to use her free arm to whack him in the ribs. Leon heaved as he was practically winded again and hit the wall, falling against it.

Serena prepared to grasp him by the neck and finish him but he grabbed the pistol and raised it as she approached, planting a bullet in her gut. She put both hands to the rapidly bleeding wound, looking somewhat surprised as Leon rose to his feet with the gun in his right hand. Instead of falling to the floor, she instead resumed her steps towards him, batting his arm aside as he fired again. The shot flew wide and impacted the wall, causing a small explosion of plaster dust. Serena grabbed Leon's gun-wielding hand but he used his free

hand to attempt to pry hers from the weapon. The two of them fell backwards, with Serena on top. For about half a minute they fought for control of the weapon, though Leon broke the fight by kneeing Serena in the stomach, exacerbating the bleeding wound there. She grunted in pain, both hands impulsively going for her stomach.

Leon regained control of the gun and planted it against her chest, firing. He blew a hole straight through her, destroying a lung. Bruised and bloodied, Leon had no reason to further his pride by fighting her hand-to-hand any further. He just wanted things to end.

He fired again, blowing another hole through the Spartan's armour. This shot got her in the stomach and she fell onto the floor, trying to hold her guts in while two mercenaries made their way into the room.

Leon shifted his aim and shot both from where he lay before he rose to his feet and regarded the dying Spartan-II below him. He felt almost guilty, knowing just how few of her kind were left. He had just added to that problem.

Leaving the room, he did not look back at Serena. She ceased moving as he walked out into the hallway.

Leon made his way out onto the balcony, aware that several more mercenaries were coming upstairs to get him. He jumped over the railing and landed on both feet, now in the middle of the compound and surrounded by about fifty heavily armed mercenaries, all of whom had their weapons trained on him. With nothing to lose, he raised his pistol and began firing. He saw three of them go down before the rest opened fire.

### 30. Last Skirmisher Standing

\*\*Last Skirmisher Standing\*\*

March 7th, 2558

Kal' Shayar was covered with red and purple blood, much of which had begun to dry up. It stuck to his skin like glue, a problem exacerbated by the fact that he still lacked anything on his upper torso. All he wore was a pair of ragged trousers that were torn and stained with the blood of others. He felt weary, but knew he must press on, having since emerged from the laboratory. He had stepped out into the harsh desert sun and felt the heat beating down upon him unrelentingly. The grounds ahead of him, all sandy-coloured with stone walls and wooden shutters over the windows, were covered with assorted litter. Somewhere nearby, a plasma mortar struck and blew away a chunk of the outer wall. The ground around the impact zone shook violently. It appeared that the Sangheili forces had started to lay waste to the fortress, though it was hard to tell exactly which side was attacking, whether it be the loyalists or rebels.

High above, a trio of Banshees zoomed overhead, streaking across the sky like vultures. They broke out of their triangular formation and started heading for one of the guard posts outside of the fortress. Their plasma cannons fired searing blue bolts of energy that obliterated the guard position and caused the mercenaries posted

there to start running. Kal'Shayar was not immediately concerned by the attack, though he did find its occurrence unsurprising since the civil war had been going on in a city only kilometres from the fortress. Now one side had clearly gained the upper hand and pushed ahead as they had crossed the desert and found this fortress. To them, it was an enemy position.

Elise stood near him. Her jacket was covered with dust and a few patches of blood, though none of it was her own. She had acquired a pistol from a fallen mercenary and was scanning their surroundings for threats with her eyes. Kal'Shayar could see none but his focus was towards one objective only: to find Lev'Kanar. He would most likely still be inside the fortress, although even he could not be certain where within it exactly. Nonetheless, he started to move, an M6D 'hand cannon' gripped in his right hand. He had picked up a smaller civilian model pistol from a fallen mercenary that he now held in his left hand, keeping at least one held at the ready as he worked his way around a stone half-wall and up a slight incline that took him to another level of the fortress. There was old Sangheili propaganda pasted across the walls here, claiming that the war against humanity years before had been a 'holy crusade'. It was typical fare for such things and not something Kal'Shayar paid a lot of attention too, despite having fought in that very war under the illusion that it had been a crusade. Now he crusaded for something different; for justice and revenge, a means to clear his name and ensure that his son received the punishment due to him.

There were two of the human mercenaries up here, both armed with DMRs. With no cover close-by, Kal'Shayar simply ducked and raised his M6D. Behind him, Elise took aim and opened fire, catching the attention of both mercenaries. One of them went down, spurts of blood erupting from his chest while the other let off a few shots that pounded into the stone near Kal'Shayar's feet. Kal'Shayar fired once, the high-powered round blowing a fist sized hole through the mercenary's chest. He fell backwards and disappeared down a brief flight of steps before landing in a heap at the bottom.

Kal'Shayar stood up and walked towards the steps that went to a low walkway, one that ran between two of the fortress' main buildings. It continued around a corner and to a ledge overlooking a wide passage that ran through the fortress' centre. There was an open set of double doors across the passage, leading into a dimly lit stone building. Three mercenaries were there, packing equipment away into cases. They were clearing out by the look of things and were oblivious to the presence of the Skirmisher who stood watching them over the ledge's stone barrier.

Kal'Shayar shot one, the bullet blowing out a lung and sending the mercenary stumbling backwards before she fell against a stack of metal crates. The impact knocked some of them over and the mercenary disappeared under them all. The other two mercenaries were quick to react, drawing their side-arms as they turned to face the Skirmisher.

Elise stepped up alongside Kal'Shayar and the pair both started shooting, cutting the two mercenaries down where they stood. Pausing for a moment as the dust settled and the smell of gun-smoke faded, Kal'Shayar reloaded his M6D, sliding the last magazine he had for the weapon home into the base of its grip. He then proceeded to climb over the short stone barrier, falling a few metres before landing at

the base of the ledge. Elise followed suit, though he made sure to help her down.

Going into the stone structure seemed the next logical step. There was a tall sandstone-coloured tower next to it, a darkened hole broken into its side at the top. It took Kal'Shayar a moment to see the glint of a rifle scope in the sunlight and he was quick to grab Elise and throw her to the ground as the mercenary in the tower fired his rifle. Kal'Shayar dived as the sniper shot slammed into the wall behind close by, causing an explosion of sandstone dust that rained upon him. Turning to face the sniper in the vantage point, Kal'Shayar could make out the shape of a Skirmisher, crouched in the dim light behind the hole at the top of the tower. The sniper was armed with a human S2 AM rifle and was about to take another shot.

Kal'Shayar took aim and let fly with a few shots from his M6D. The first one grazed the Skirmisher in the left arm, throwing off his aim completely and causing him to screech loudly in pain. The second caught him in the chest, blowing through his heart. He fell forwards and landed with half of him dangling through the hole but not enough for gravity to push him out of the tower. His arms dangled freely over the fortress, purple blood dripping from his wounds and landing upon the sandy ground below.

Kal'Shayar was the first inside the stone structure. It was fairly cool within, the air musty as he walked by a stack of metal boxes and found a short set of stairs leading into the heart of the structure. The wind whistled inside, causing canvas sheets that hung from a set of scaffolding in the central room to flap about haphazardly. The central room was fairly large, with several purple metal crates lying around as well as a number of sleeping mats positioned at the other side of the room. There was a laptop computer situated on a table in the corner, evidence that the building had been used as some sort of base of operations. One thing the Skirmisher noticed as he walked inside was the silence: save for the whistle of the outside breeze and the flapping of canvas, there was little other sound. Occasionally there would be the distant thump of an explosion from the battle outside and the ground would shake, trails of dust falling from the ceiling. Other than that, it was quiet. Unnervingly so.

Elise was a few steps behind him and took in the room with a careful gaze, wary of any surprises. She walked past him before taking a look down one of the hallways that branched off of the room. Kal'Shayar lowered his pistol momentarily, feeling some disappointment that Lev'Kanar was not inside. He had no idea where his son was, or if he was even still in the fortress. He was not one to run away from a fight, so it was very likely that he was still within the compound. The difficulty would be in finding him and not getting shot by anyone in the process.

There was movement from behind one of the boxes at the far end of the room. Lir'Vak emerged with a sidearm and Kal'Shayar was quick to raise his weapon in response. She fired at the same time he did, though her aim was not directed at the Skirmisher: rather, it had been towards Elise, who had had her back turned at that very moment.

Lir'Vak stumbled as the high-powered round blew into her left hand, blasting most of it away in a sickly spray of dark purple blood and

chunks of flesh and bone. The bullet did not stop at that: it went through her hand and into her stomach before shattering inside, sending multiple razor sharp shards tearing through her. The exit wound that exploded out of her back was large and jagged, splattering dark purple blood onto the wall behind her. She dropped her pistol and stumbled backwards, looking down at her wounds with a surprised and terrified look forming on her face.

Kal'Shayar turned his attention to Elise, who had slumped against the wall, red blood forming around a bullet-hole in her back in line with her upper chest. Rushing towards her, Kal'Shayar grabbed her by both arms, stowing his pistols away at his waist as he held her close and lay her flat onto the floor. A mix of emotions flowed through him: worry, fear, anger. He did not want to lose her, certainly not like this.

"Kal," she said, her voice strained. She looked into his eyes as she put a hand to the exit wound at her chest. As far as Kal'Shayar could tell, the bullet had gone straight through. He was not an expert on human anatomy but it was clear to him that the shot had not struck anything significant. She moved her other hand to his face and caressed it gently.

"Elise," Kal'Shayar said, his usually level tone faltering. "I said I would protect you..."

"And you did. Just get me that first aid kit, over there." Elise pointed with one finger to the table where the laptop was located, at the corner. There was a first aid kit lying by it, along with a few other odds and ends, among them a radio and field manual.

Kal'Shayar stood up, leaving Elise to sit against the crates as he started towards the desk. His attention went back to Lir'Vak, who was now leaning against the wall whilst trying to hold her guts in with her one good hand. She was muttering under her breath, her hackles raised in anxiety and rage. Kal'Shayar thought little of her as he went towards the desk, though he did not notice the other Skirmisher emerging from a hallway behind him.

This one, one of the many that had been working for Lev'Kanar, was outfitted in a typically rugged grey set of armour. He held an equally rugged civilian side-arm and raised it as Kal'Shayar stopped by the desk, his back turned. Elise, in her somewhat dazed state, saw the threat and shouted.

Kal'Shayar turned around and drew his weapon in a single fluid movement, but the other Skirmisher fired. The shot hit Kal'Shayar in the left side of the neck, passing straight through it and sending a searing hot pain piercing through his head. He stumbled but was able to raise his weapon anyway and was able to shoot the Skirmisher twice in the chest. The Skirmisher fell against the wall to his left before slumping down it, staining the surface with a sizeable smear of blood.

Elise had started bleeding out, the front and back of her shirt and jacket having become soaked with blood. Kal'Shayar, clutching his throat with his left hand and aware that the simple act of breathing had suddenly become more difficult, still managed to grab the first aid kit and focus on the task at hand despite his condition. He walked over to Elise before he knelt by her and opened the kit. He

found a vial of bio-foam within, just the thing he needed. Doing his best to ignore the pain, he used one hand to pull the jacket from Elise's form. She was falling into unconsciousness, something that worried him greatly. He himself suddenly found it increasingly hard to focus, his movements becoming slower and less coordinated as his own blood dribbled down his neck. Regardless, he sprayed a large amount of the bio-foam into Elise's wound, on her front and her back, stemming the blood-flow and hopefully stabilizing her condition.

Kal'Shayar stood up, aware that Lir'Vak had started moving towards him. She was unsteady on her feet, her one good hand clutching her bleeding stomach. He pulled his M6D on her, but felt he could not pull the trigger, not when she was in her current state. She was wrought with anger, her mouth open wide and jagged teeth visible as she moved towards him.

"I'll kill you," she screamed, lunging at the wounded Skirmisher. Kal'Shayar pushed her off of him with one hand, his balance faltering momentarily as he put his free-hand back to holding his bleeding neck. As she stumbled off of him, another gunshot rang out from nearby. Kal'Shayar felt the bullet collide with his right arm, making him fall backwards as the pain shot all the way up to his shoulder and caused him to drop his pistol. He turned his head, seeing another one of Lev'Kanar's Kig-Yar followers standing at the top of the short flight of stairs. Seemingly satisfied with the result of his shot, the Jackal began to approach, holding a small pistol.

Kal'Shayar hit the wall, his right arm hanging limply by his side. Taking his left one away from his wounded neck, he pulled out the other sidearm he had been carrying at his waist and quickly took aim. He was equally quick on the trigger and fired again and again, planting four rounds into the approaching Kig-Yar, two of which struck the foe in the head and sent him falling limply onto the floor.

His neck and arm burning, Kal'Shayar rose to his feet. Elise lay unconscious against the nearby crates and Lir'Vak lay on the floor, heaving violently and coughing blood. Kal'Shayar's mind was on one thing only as he walked up to her and shot her in the back of the head, blowing her brains out. Continuing past her, he made an unconscious decision to take the nearest corridor which he followed out of the building and into a courtyard area.

As he stepped through the exit, Lev'Kanar appeared on his side with a large plank of wood clutched in his hands. He struck his father across the head with considerable force, throwing Kal'Shayar's entire coordination askew. The elder Skirmisher stumbled and floundered, his arms going out to balance himself, finding grip on a nearby sandstone wall as his head throbbed and lights danced around in his vision. The world spun around him and everything blurred, with the voice of his son sounding distant despite him standing only a few metres away.

"Father, you are persistent," Lev'Kanar said as he watched the elder Skirmisher stumble. "I like to think I am much the same. You taught me everything, after all. You taught me how to fight and how to shoot, from the moment I was old enough to pick up a blade or even a rifle."

"You were two..." Kal'Shayar muttered, remembering it vividly. Past memories were strangely more visible to him now compared to his view on his current reality, where things no longer seemed quite real. Lev'Kanar approached him and grabbed him by one shoulder, turning him around as he tossed the broken plank of wood aside. He punched his father in the gut, winding him before he threw him back against the wall and laughed.

Kal'Shayar had dropped his pistol again, though it lay only a short distance away. He fell to his knees and went for it, receiving a powerful kick from Lev'Kanar for his trouble. He groaned as the pain overtook him momentarily, causing him to cough up blood.

"You should just swallow your pride for once," Lev'Kanar said, standing over him. Kal'Shayar looked up at his son, his mind going back to the times he had spent raising the boy, teaching him how to fight, how to shoot, only for him to go completely off the rails. It was distressing, though these memories were all he really had. The Skirmisher standing over him was not his son, not anymore.

"Give it up. This whole thing is finished. I tried to reason with you, father. I tried to make you see things the way I did. But your stubbornness once again impairs your better judgement. That is another thing I inherited from you. Thank you, by the way." This last sentence was said sarcastically. Kal'Shayar could hardly tell in his partially dazed state.

He could see the gun lying just out of reach. There was no chance his son would allow him near it, but he had little other option. He felt so weak, drenched in the blood of his enemies while plenty of his own had started flowing down his chest. His right arm had been rendered useless and hung limp at his side, the elbow joint a jagged mess of flesh and broken bone. The pain had started to return; the adrenaline that had been flowing through his system had begun to subside.

"Your plan..." Kal'Shayar said weakly, turning his head to look up at his son. "It has been stopped. There will be no war, no super soldiers of your own."

"That no longer matters. Even without Caine, the humans would have gone to war anyway. They are a barbaric race and I am surprised you do not see that. Instead, you fall in love with one their kind. What would mother think?"

"You have no right to mention her," Kal'Shayar spat. He could taste blood in his mouth. "You left home. You stopped being part of our family years ago. You caused your mother so much grief..."

"No, you did, father. You were never there for her. For me. For Jeril."

"I trained you..."

"Only during the short times you were home. Instead, you went to fight in the war and left Jeril and I with mother. And then when she died, when you should have just come home to look after your own two children, you instead went out to war again."

"It was my duty..."

"Your duty was to your family!" Lev'Kanar lost his temper for the first time in a long while, yelling as he pelted his father with a few powerful kicks.

Kal'Shayar fell onto all fours as his son continued to strike him. He grunted from the increasing agony but through it all he found that he could reach the pistol now. His left hand wrapped around its hilt. Lev'Kanar saw this and went to react but his father was fast, rolling onto his back and firing. There were only two rounds left in the magazine: one pierced through the armoured vest and travelled into the younger Skirmisher's chest while the other struck him in the stomach.

Kal'Shayar watched with a feeling of dreadful realization as his son stumbled backwards, his hands going to his stomach. Kal'Shayar slowly rose to his feet before he tossed the empty gun aside, almost as if the object disgusted him.

Lev'Kanar had an almost impassionate gaze on his face. He remained standing, despite the purple blood that poured out of his wounds. He looked his father in the eyes, a hint of anger appearing within his yellow irises before he started to take a few steps forwards.

Kal'Shayar was surprised when his son lunged for him violently, pushing him against the sandstone wall behind them. Lev'Kanar slugged his father across the face, snapping his head back and knocking loose a tooth. Kal'Shayar struggled to stand up against the strength of his son as he felt utterly weak in comparison. Another blow caught him in the neck, compounding the pain from the bullet wound there, sending agony shooting through his skull. Kal'Shayar put out one hand, searching for anything he could use as a weapon. His grip fell upon a metal pole, part of some scaffolding that had been set up against the wall. He pulled and ripped a length of the pole free, managing to slam it into the side of Lev'Kanar's head while the younger Skirmisher pummelled him with blows.

Lev'Kanar was knocked onto the ground by the force of the blow and his father, bloodied and bruised, went to hit him again. Lev'Kanar instead jumped back onto his feet, his balance looking a bit off as his wounds began to get the better of him. He lunged for Kal'Shayar again, but the elder Skirmisher side-stepped him before pushing him into the wall.

Lev'Kanar recovered quickly and turned around, charging after his father with reckless abandon, his eyes wide in anger. Kal'Shayar raised the metal pole and felt his son's weight against it, though he stood his ground, realizing what he had just done.

The pole had gone straight through his son's throat and out the back of his neck. Blood oozed out of it freely while Lev'Kanar choked and gargled. Even so, he took a step closer and put a hand to his father's shoulder, the look in his eyes almost a pleading one before he finally lost his balance and slumped against his father, no longer breathing.

Kal'Shayar put his arms around his son and held him close for a minute, oblivious to the sounds of battle that closed in from nearby. Sangheili soldiers had begun to blast their way into the fortress, wasting the mercenaries posted on guard.

Easing his son's body down to the ground, Kal'Shayar made his way back inside the main building. Elise was where he had left her and a quick check of her pulse confirmed that she was still alive. Kal'Shayar sat down next to her, letting his weariness get the better of him. He placed an arm around his human lover and held her close, though it was only a brief respite as he fell into unconsciousness minutes later.

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><p><span>March 16th, 2558<span>

Deval was an ageing Skirmisher, an old and experienced warrior who had gone into a quiet retirement on Sauem. Recent events had brought him out of that retirement, especially when he had heard of Kal'Shayar's involvement. Now he was on board a Covenant cruiser on the edge of Kig-Yar space, sent with a very specific purpose as his own squad of soldiers searched though the ruins of the fortress on Decided Heart.

Medical facilities on a Covenant-built ship were not terribly elaborate, though the Kig-Yar working here had done their best to make them at least decent. Sangheili, who were the majority on board, were overly superstitious about medicine and so there were few times when they would willingly come here for medical help. The Kig-Yar and their Skirmisher counterparts were a bit more accepting of medical science and it had taken some months since the end of the war for their medical practices to get back on track, as the Covenant had sorely limited their developments in medicine. Certain human organizations had been willing to help and supplied medical equipment. Most of the scientists that were sent had been more interested in dissecting aliens and learning about their physiology rather than actually training the Kig-Yar doctors, or 'healers' as they were often called.

Kal'Shayar had bandages around his neck and one arm in a sling. He sat up on one of the somewhat soft beds inside the ship's medical bay, staring into space as he pondered all that had occurred. Elise stood near him and she had his good hand in her own. Her fingers teased the plume of feathers on that arm, not that he minded. He enjoyed her touch and could think of only one thing he wanted to do with her when he was finally fit enough to leave.

Elise had voiced concern over him, asking him if he wanted to talk about what had happened to Lev'Kanar. Kal'Shayar had accepted what he had done with solemnity. He knew now that he had no more family and no reason to ever return to his old life. There was something appealing about staying with Elise, a possibility that had become more appealing when they had received a visit from an ONI official the day before. He had told them that they should stay away from Earth. Caine had caused a lot of damage by what he had done and there were still plenty of his supporters in positions of power. War was brewing and Kal'Shayar knew that his son had had a point when he had said that the humans would go to war, regardless of whether Caine had taken power or not: there were plenty of humans who wanted one and plenty of Sangheili (and Kig-Yar) who thought similarly. The humans were in a position to go to war, one they could very well win, even if it was likely that the cost on both sides would be staggering.

Kal'Shayar's head still hurt badly, a result of the blow he had received from Lev'Kanar and a certain plank of wood. He had been told that the blow had caused some minor internal damage, leaving him with a nasty scar above one eye and sporadic headaches.

"I was thinking," Elise said, looking down at him. She was in a clean jacket now, her wounds minor save for the bullet wound that had almost hit her in the heart. It was hidden underneath her clothes and would leave a notable scar, but little else. "About us. Where should we go? Not Earth, that's for sure. And you said that there's nothing for you on Sauem."

"There is Reach," Kal'Shayar replied. He had given the matter a lot of thought lately, as the one good thing about being stuck in a hospital bed was that one had plenty of time to think. "The population there is small and they need help rebuilding the colony."

Elise nodded in agreement.

"I might still have some respect there. You and I could build a house for ourselves in the hills outside Pike's Creek." It was a spontaneous suggestion, but an appealing one no less.

"That would be good."

They both fell silent. Kal'Shayar occasionally thought about Leon, the Spartan-III who had single-handedly killed Caine and Serena. The Sangheili, on their rampage through the desert, had gone to Caine's outpost, the one that had sat in the desert valley a kilometre from the fortress. There, they had found most of the mercenaries had packed up and left while Caine and Serena lay dead, their bodies where they had fallen. Leon had not been found and a search of the surrounding area had uncovered nothing. Whether or not he had fled into the desert or somehow gotten off-world was unknown. Kal'Shayar hoped he had survived, but it seemed unlikely.

Deval entered the room at that point, outfitted in the armour of a Champion save for his helmet. Kal'Shayar was surprised to see him here and in uniform but Deval was quick to address his friend's noticeable surprise.

"I was brought out of retirement to lead a strike-force," Deval explained. "They wanted me to go on your trail, so I did. Apparently our government actually cares enough about you and the actions of your son to send me and some of our own after you."

His gaze went to Elise and he bowed his head slightly in greeting.

"You must be Commander McGillon. My name is Deval. I am a friend of Kal'Shayar. I was notified of your involvement in the battle on Decided Heart." He regarded the both of them. "You two were lucky that the Sangheili rebels found you, for if the loyalists had you would surely have been executed."

Elise nodded in acknowledgement. Deval approached Kal'Shayar's bed, standing a short distance by its side as he regarded the younger Skirmisher.

"I was told to speak to you, but my superiors would much rather me question you as to what your son was doing on Decided Heart," Deval said. "My soldiers have searched the fortress and found evidence of Forerunner technology that had been in use." He paused, an uncertain look appearing on his face. "Our government would very much like to acquire the technology in question, as some of the mercenaries the rebels captured spoke of technology capable of infusing individuals with enhanced abilities. Is this true?"

Kal'Shayar narrowed his gaze. Deval cleared his throat.

"Of course, since the technology was destroyed, my soldiers surely cannot return anything of use to the home-world." Deval gave his species' version of a smile. "I am sure our government will be most disappointed."

Deval nodded towards Kal'Shayar, who returned the nod. He had always been able to trust Deval.

"I am sorry to hear about your son," he added.

Kal'Shayar shook his head.

"I have accepted his death and moved on."

"Very well." Deval looked at each of them in turn. "Kal, I get the impression you may not be returning to Sauem. I could arrange to have your valuables brought here for you, from your home."

"I would be most grateful for that."

Deval bowed slightly to the both of them before he turned around and left the room. Kal'Shayar felt another headache coming on but he ignored it and instead turned his attention towards Elise.

"Do you think there'll be a war?" She asked.

"Maybe." Kal'Shayar did not know what to think. Would the humans and Sangheili be foolish enough to fight one another again? There were renegade factions on both sides who could very easily ignite a full-scale conflict.

"I know for certain that I do not wish to be a part of it," Kal'Shayar said. He looked up to Elise, taking her hands in his own. "Once we can leave here, I would very much like for us to go and build that house on Reach, in the hills over Pike's Creek." She could easily get a job there, resume her work as a Commander. He could live quietly once again, even if part of him regretted not being able to give her children. Of course, that would not stop him from trying.

He at least had a future he could look forward to now, far more than what he had before meeting Elise.

Kal'Shayar felt content for the first time in a long time. There was a new chapter of his life ahead of him. In a way, it was a second chance, something very few people ever got. He would make sure to gain the absolute most from it.

\* \* \*

><p>END.<p>

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><p><em>Author's Note: <em>And that's it. I do hope you enjoyed this story. Feel free to comment on it as a whole, if you wish.

End  
file.